

THE IVORY CROSS

FORESTER CLARKE

Ex Libris

C. K. OGDEN



THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

PR
4453
C712

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I THE FARM	I
II THE HARWOODS	11
III ISABEL	24
IV HUGH	33
V MICHAEL MACCAFFEY	45
VI "OLD EMERALD"	59
VII THE PLIGHT OF THE PUGHS	69
VIII HUGH'S PROMISE	80
IX THE CHURCH OF CRAIGIEOWEN	93
X WALHALLA	105
XI THE COST OF A PROMISE	124
XII THE LOST CROSS	144
XIII LALLAH RENCLIFFE	160
XIV "SKRIMPO"	172
XV FERGUS MCLEOD	184
XVI THE LEGACY	195
XVII CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE	210
XVIII THE FINDING OF THE IVORY CROSS	224

1005359



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

<http://www.archive.org/details/ivorycross00clar>

THE IVORY CROSS

CHAPTER I

THE FARM

“**A** LETTER from Justice Harwood, mother.”
“Is there, Robert? I am always glad to hear from him; he was your father’s dearest friend.”

Robert Rothsay had just come in and brought the mail. Some member of the family always called for it at the little schoolhouse, half a mile beyond the outskirts of their farm. By going to the nearest town, some five miles away, it was possible to get it daily, but it was only sent to the Craigieowen schoolhouse thrice weekly, and the children attending would bring home the mails to their separate households. Where there were no children attending, some of the farm hands would be sent, if the girls of the household were too busy to ride along; always allowing, of course, that their brothers did not possess a soft spot in their hearts for the pretty little schoolmistress. Under those circumstances it was the simplest matter to invent

an excuse ; whether it was a stray steer, a wandering horse, or seed potatoes to inspect, they would sure to be located schoolwards. Robert Rothsay was the exception, for no woman outside his mother and sisters held a special interest for him.

“ What does the letter say, Robert ? ”

“ It’s not very long, mother ; I’ll read it.”

“ BOGIEURN,” ST. KILDA ROAD,

“ MELBOURNE.

“ MY DEAR OLD FRIEND,—

“ I was exceedingly disappointed that you and Lucy could not accept our invitation when in town last week. Your farm life must be one amazing whirl, for you never seem to have a second, when in town, to give to an old friend.

“ Do you know that I have not had the pleasure of meeting Robert and the girls since they were children ? I am very desirous that Hilda and Hugh should make their acquaintance, and as the mountain will not come to Mohammed, why, Mohammed will have to come to the mountain, that’s all ; so I propose to bring them up myself as soon as ever you will send us an invitation.

“ I know that the spring-time is your slack season, and therefore the best time to catch you.

“ My heartiest wishes to my dear old chum’s wife and family,

“ And believe me,

“ Earnestly yours,

“ FRANCIS E. HARWOOD.”

Robert looked up. "That's he all over—isn't it, mother?—simple and straight."

"Yes, my boy; he was always so."

"Well, it's good to think that we will have congenial company at last; it will cheer us all up, and we are not very busy, as the Justice remarks. Won't the girls be delighted?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Robert," his mother answered abstractedly. "I would dearly love to see them all here, but I hardly see how we can manage it. That's partly the reason why I have always avoided them in town. You know they keep up great style in Melbourne, and they would find the simple life we live here very irksome, I fear."

"Well, Mother, they apparently mean to come and see us, not the way we live; if they find it trying, they know their way back again," Robert answered in his matter-of-fact way. "And besides, they ought to feel themselves honoured to have my mother and sisters' company," he answered proudly.

His mother passed a loving arm about his neck. "Your mother is just an ordinary old woman, Robert, but she is proud of her children."

"Old woman, indeed!" he answered, giving her a hearty kiss. "But I must get a pace on; I've the dickens of a lot to do to-night."

He hurried away and changed his clothes for rough tweed pants and cotton shirt; even then he looked what he and his father before him was—a

true gentleman. He was tall and fair, with blue eyes and a fine physique—a remarkably good-looking man and a singularly honourable one.

From the time his father had left him in charge of the farm, when he was only seventeen years of age, ten years ago, his one thought had been for the comfort of his mother and sisters.

His father, Robert St. John Rothsay, had belonged to one of the oldest and wealthiest families then in England.

Shortly after his twenty-first birthday, and while enjoying his Christmas vacation from Oxford, he chanced one day to be walking in his father's estate and met Dorothy Deane, the gamekeeper's daughter. He spoke to Dorothy, a friendship sprang up, and before he knew or thought what he was doing, that friendship had ripened into love so deep and strong that no force could stop it.

When his father chanced to know how matters stood, he ordered Robert to break with Dorothy immediately or leave his home for ever, whichever he chose. He knew his father's stern, unrelenting nature, also he knew that he could not expect much sympathy from his mother or sister, who were cold and proud.

He had had a private legacy of a few hundreds on his coming of age, and together with his savings from his last quarterly allowance, he was enabled to marry Dorothy and embark for Australia.

For years he followed mining with fair success,

and when Robert was ten years old he bought a farm. He was too proud to enlighten his father with Dorothy's history. It would have been little use and would have hurt her sensitive nature. In reality Dorothy was as well born as he. Her grandfather was an English Bishop, stern and unloving, and because his son would not enter the Church and also abominated study, he was forced to quit his parental home, not by any spoken command but by persistent sarcasm. After many attempts and failures to find suitable employment, he at last succeeded in obtaining the position of gamekeeper, about the only position he was capable of honestly fulfilling. Some years later he married a governess from an adjoining estate, herself a doctor's daughter. So that marriage with Dorothy Deane was no *mesalliance* whatever. Robert's father was thrown from a horse and killed shortly after he had turned that young gentleman adrift. The estate was not entailed and so went to his mother, but from her he never heard again.

He was well repaid for his loyalty to Dorothy, for hers was a priceless love. She had been well educated and was a nature's gentlewoman. Robert and she were not always well off financially, but their love compensated for any lack of means.

One son, Robert, and three daughters were born to them. Lucy next to Robert, and then Isabel and Gwen. They were all handsome and distin-

guished, and not at all like the ordinary run of farm children.

Lucy was like Robert, fair with blue eyes, always a gentle girl, but nevertheless with a firm will. Isabel was taller than Lucy, with brown hair and eyes, and with a proud manner which misled strangers. Gwen was four years younger than Isabel, and the light and sunshine of the whole household. She was tall for seventeen, but perfectly proportioned and with a figure full of graceful curves. Her hair was a golden brown and fell in soft waves to her shoulders. She had only to shake her saucy head and Nature's barber achieved wonders. Her skin was clear and fresh like a peach bloom, but her eyes were her chief glory: the white of the eye was—blue, the rest was dark, but they lit up her whole face, her hair, her dress, her hands—a steady, beautiful light. When they were closed her beauty was not so remarkable.

Mr. Rothsay had given all his children a good education; he had left a farm of several hundred acres "in good going order," as the auctioneers say. The farm was clear of debt when he left it, and it was still clear, despite two bad seasons which had followed on the heels of each other. First a season of very little rain (not often known in Gippsland), then a season of raging, ravishing bush fires, which burnt the grass and destroyed the fences and sheltering trees.

But the family had come through their misfor-

tunes bravely. The children worked in unison with that steady perseverance not often found in young, happy people. They denied themselves many simple pleasures during those bad seasons for fear of encountering debt, but gained the respect of some of those farmers who instinctively felt them to be their superiors and had before resented it.

In the early days of their farming experience and when the children were young they had employed a woman for the kitchen, and a nurse, besides a man to help about the place; but later on, when the expenses increased, they had to dismiss the help and do the work themselves. So now only in the harvest time and ploughing season did they hire help.

On this particular day the girls had driven into town to do their weekly shopping.

"Mother, I've put the milk on to scald. Here's the girls!" And off bounded Bob.

"Holloa, Bob! Are we late? Ugh! it's cold. Catch!" and down came rugs, parcels, and three strong, healthy, happy girls almost at the same time.

"Run in, girls; I'll take the horses out."

"Oh, Bob, you're me own darlint and after me own heart!" called out Gwen as she ran.

When Bob came in the girls had changed their dresses, and they all sat down to tea. These evenings were always exciting to them after their

outing, but this evening was one of particular excitement.

The thoughts of Justice Harwood's visit brought back to Mrs. Rothsay the time of sad parting with her husband.

Robert was excited at the possibility of having a young man from a busy, whirling city brought into his life, and no doubt Isabel and Gwen were excited for the selfsame reason. As for Lucy, the Harwoods were friends of the Mortimers, and Lucy was more than friendly with John Mortimer.

"Isabel, why are you wrinkling up your brows?" asked Bob.

"Well, Bob, because I really do not see what we are to do with them when they do come. City people will not enjoy seeing us milk cows, making butter, and dear knows what besides."

"Do with them! Do with them!" called Gwen. "I'll quickly settle that for you. Mother, you will manage the Justice, and you girls will cook for them. Bob, you will entertain Hilda, and I—oh, just think of it!—I'll make love to Hugh."

"Capital, Gwen! I'll do my share, that's if she doesn't bore a fellow," added Bob as an after-thought.

"Oh, if Hugh bores me, Isabel can have him."

"Thank you, Gwen," said Isabel with a smile. Then they all fell to discussing ways and means.

"You see," said Isabel, "the work must go on

just the same while they are here, and what a plight we will be in if we run short of chaff and an order comes in for some ; while we lock ourselves up in the barn and cut they must sit still staring at the walls."

" Not so fast, Izy ; let me put in a spoke. Well, first of all, if you had been hencooped up in a city, like we were those years at school, for instance, I don't know about other people, but it was like heaven to get back to the farm again. If we could give them one round of gaiety they might as well stay at home. It's the entire novelty that will charm them and we need not be dull. There's rides and drives, music, and the neighbours to visit. Then what is to stop us from giving them a trip to Walhalla ? People rave about the mountains of Switzerland and Italy, and yet here within a hundred miles of Melbourne is this beautiful, unique hill town, left almost unknown except by mining circles."

" You're a wonderful man, Bob ; any more ideas ? " asked Gwen.

" My fertile brain abounds with them, my sister. I propose, too, if it meets with general approval " (this with a side glance at Lucy), " that we take them to see our Gippsland lakes."

" It would be delightful, Robert, but could we manage the expense of so many ? "

" Yes, mother, of course we could. We could take the big trap and drive to Sale, and have a

picnic on the way, and that would leave only boat and hotel expenses."

Bob's practical view of things in general sent everybody's spirits up with a bound, especially Lucy's, for John Mortimer was there with a friend for a few weeks' shooting and sport.

Next day a letter was dispatched inviting the Harwoods to the farm, and subsequently a reply came stating that they would arrive by the midday train on the following Tuesday.

Then followed bustle and confusion at the farmhouse, for everything in and out got an overhauling; besides, all the work that could be done in advance with safety was done. In fact, by the time Tuesday came round everything had on a Christmas appearance, even to old Rags, the cattle dog, and Scraggy, the terrier.

CHAPTER II

THE HARWOODS

THE Gippsland train from Melbourne was five minutes behind time. Not that the occurrence was so unusual as to be worth commenting upon. Indeed one who travelled often on that line could take it for granted. Still one's inner man must be in a solid condition to take even such trifles with equanimity.

Seated in a first class reserved carriage were three people not disposed to take a lenient view of the train's snail-like pace ; simply because they had neglected to fortify themselves sufficiently for a long journey, contenting their palates with a glass of wine and a biscuit, instead of a substantial luncheon at Warrigal, where the train halted twenty minutes for refreshments.

They were Justice Harwood, Hilda and Hugh.

The Justice was not a remarkably handsome man. He had a good face and commanding figure, and a clear, kindly eye, which had a disconcerting effect on a guilty prisoner.

His son Hugh was exactly what his father must

have been at eight-and-twenty. He was tall and well formed, with the same honest face and kindly grey eye.

He had studied for the Bar, and now had an office in Collins Street and a fair connection. But it was merely to gratify his father's ambition that he tolerated the law at all. For his own part his one hobby was to be the possessor of a cattle station in Queensland. He had just passed through a severe illness, and it was partly on his account that the Justice had got leave for a few weeks' rest.

Hilda was unlike either father or brother. Of medium height, slight and inclined to be sharp featured. Her small head was crowned with a mass of auburn hair, and her eyes were a steel grey. Just the face of the society woman who would sacrifice heart for ambition.

"It's rather a strange thing, Pater, isn't it, that I've never come to Gippsland before, and it is said to be the garden of Victoria, if not of Australia."

"Which it undoubtedly is, my boy. You can have no conception of its vast resources until you have made a personal inspection. Some of the river flats are the richest in the world. It abounds in good rivers ; has lakes, hills, valleys and plains ; is rich in precious metals ; has a splendid climate, ranging from snow-clad mountains to warm dry tablelands. In fact, the socialists have pictured it as the playground of Australia when their Utopian

Arcadia becomes a reality," his father answered enthusiastically.

"But will it?" Hugh asked absently.

"Never! Human nature is too complex. Nevertheless their extreme views, although impracticable, have the effect of making the worker think for himself and have already brought out a great many issues for the advancement of a democratic country."

"Yes, I think you are right, Pater; their platform is too extreme. What this place really wants, I should say, was population—workers. Why the Government do not bring out immigrants by the thousand, I can't make out. We want closer settlement in Australia, and I'm sure there are thousands of people at home who would jump at the chance if the way was made sufficiently easy for them. They would have a chance here. Population would bring railways, and with easy transit their market would be assured," Hugh said, as he pushed up the window to let Hilda get a glimpse of the wild heath which grew on the hillsides, through which they were then travelling.

"I only hope those farm people of yours will show us around a bit, papa. You say they are educated and are ladies, but I can hardly reconcile milking cows, pigsties, and horse feeding with ladies," Hilda said contemptuously.

"Well, Hilda, you will find that I am correct in every particular," the Justice said hurriedly,

and Hilda adroitly changed the subject, and lay back on the cushions watching the scenery. She caught sight of several uninviting-looking farm-houses with herds of milch cows on the hillsides and flats which rather fitted in with her conception of what was in store for her.

As the train approached the station she drew a mental picture of a gawky farmer lad meeting them with a spring cart and draught horse, and was therefore quite unprepared to meet a gentleman with a quiet, dignified manner, who drove a stylish turnout drawn by a pair of well-groomed greys. She had not adjusted her mind to the almost unbelievable fact before she was being welcomed by Robert's mother and sisters.

After the first greeting was over Lucy took her away to her room. The first exclamation of this proud city girl was, "How very beautiful!"

"It is very plain, indeed," Lucy answered simply.

It had been two rooms knocked into one. The three girls had always occupied this large bedroom and had a dressing-room off it. It had an old-fashioned white-papered wall with bunches of blue flowers all over it, plain white muslin curtains on the bed and windows, looped back with blue ribbon, a white pine floor with a few fleecy white sheepskins scattered about the floor. On the dressing-table was a jar of pink moss-roses, two jars of maidenhair fern adorned the mantelshelf,

the perfume of camphor came from the dressing-room, and the breeze seemed to waft the most exquisite combination of odours in from the old-fashioned garden.

Hilda was right: it was beautiful in its old-fashioned simplicity.

"Do you know," said Miss Harwood, "that this stillness charms and frightens me at the same time! It seems like that hush and stillness in church after the people rise but just before the benediction."

Lucy smiled. "Yes, it must seem strange to you after the noise and bustle of the city."

When Hilda rejoined her folk in the drawing-room she was again surprised, for although the room was large enough, it had old-fashioned paperings, worn and old furniture, the piano had legs, the carpet was worn, and yet there was an air of grandeur that she had never before seen. There was an air of delicate sweetness about all the little appointments which only refinement could bring out.

The room was filled with maidenhair fern and wattle blossom, and there was a cheerful fire in a rather wide, whitewashed fireplace.

The whole family seemed to accord with their surroundings, and Hilda was clearly interested for the first time in her life.

"I hope, my dear, that you will soon feel rested," Mrs. Rothsay said as Hilda came in.

"Justice, we dine in the country always at midday. It is more convenient, for the evenings are our chief time to visit. The farmers rarely expect visitors until after dinner," she said as she advanced towards the dining-room.

Here again Hilda was impressed. Just an old-fashioned, very clumsy dining-room, papered like the rest of the house. A big whitewashed fireplace, an old leather suite, but the curtains were fresh and the sideboard gleamed with glass and silver and flowers, as the table did also.

Neither did she find her pet aversion—corn beef and cabbage; but a homely, wholesome dinner fit to set before the King.

Mrs. Rothsay served the soup, Gwen passed it round, Robert carved, and everybody helped themselves to vegetables. It was Robert who removed the dishes on a big tray and returned from the kitchen with the pudding. Thus without apparent fuss or bustle were the things served and removed. It came as a surprise to the visitors when Gwen in one of her mischievous moods turned to Hugh.

"Hugh Harwood, kindly press that button behind you. I want Cleopatra to bring me a glass of water."

Hugh turned as he was bidden, but no button could he see. Lucy turned to him. "Take no notice of her, Mr. Harwood. Cleopatra and Anastasia are only her imaginary attendants."

"But surely you do keep a servant, Miss Rothsay?" Hilda asked.

"Why?" asked Lucy.

"I hardly know, except that things are in such excellent order and the dinner so good that I can't understand."

"You will after a few days, though," suggested Gwen: "Just wait until you help me wash up when the dishes are especially greasy."

"Do you not get weary without help?" continued Hilda.

Isabel laughed. "Well, you know, in the busy times one has hardly time to get weary, that is, you have hardly time to think whether you are or not; but when the pressure of work is over and one gets into a good book——"

They all laughed. "H'm!" commenced Bob. "Yes, I'd better tell it, Izy; it will make your meaning clear."

Gwen held up a warning finger, but Bob went on.

"Last year, after a particularly busy time, I took mother and Lucy out for the day. We left after breakfast and returned just at dusk. We saw no sign of the girls. The table was just as we had left it at breakfast. We called loudly, then I hunted around the garden, and there they lay under an apple tree. Gwen was fast asleep with a book tucked in her arms, and Izy was fairly buried in another—her face right against the print; and when we got lights and looked around we found

that they had turned the plates upside down to save moving from the table, and——”

“Bob, if you say another word Justice Harwood will hear all sorts of things——”

“All right, girls, I won’t say another word,” put in Bob in evident alarm. And so the first dinner passed in harmless pleasantry.

Hilda and Hugh had never enjoyed a meal as much in their lives. They could not have told why, but the fact remained.

Mrs. Rothsay suggested that their guests would feel the benefit of an after-dinner nap after their fatiguing journey. They followed her advice with such good intent that it was five o’clock before they showed up again.

Hilda was the first out. Everything was so still and quiet that she felt nervous. She went into the dressing-room—nobody there, but a new wood fire burned in the fireplace; then to the dining-room—nobody there either, but the table was laid for tea and decorated with ferns and roses, and beside every napkin was a little bunch of violets, which made the room fragrant.

“They just look like Gwen,” Hilda thought. Then she went further through the house and listened—not a sound, so she opened the kitchen door and softly entered.

There was Gwen, standing by a table with her face all aglow from the heat of the oven and exer-

cise, her sleeves tucked up and a big white apron tied about her, mixing buttermilk scones.

She looked up with a start as Hilda came in. "Oh, it's you!" and she made a mock curtsy. "I'm making scones for the gentry."

"Well, I certainly hope you will include me, for those look tempting enough that way to eat. How did you all learn to cook so well, Gwen?"

"Oh, I can't cook well. Bob says that I can make stunning salad, tiptop scones, and that's all I'm good for in the cooking line; but Lucy and Izy are famous cooks, they can make anything. When I came home from school first I strained an Irish stew, to my everlasting teasification."

Hilda laughed. "Where were you educated, Gwen?"

"I was four years at the girls' college in Sale. Lucy taught me before that."

"And the girls?" Hilda questioned.

"Oh, they used to have a governess and then they each had two years at the Ladies' Methodist College in Melbourne. Bob had three years at the Scotch college," Gwen answered.

Hilda would have liked to have questioned further, but she was too well bred to take advantage of Gwen's innocence, and besides she was not quite sure, in this silent house, where the rest were. Instead, she sat down on a stool and watched Gwen put the fat creamy squares of dough into the oven

and presently take them out in the form of delicately browned buttermilk scones.

Gwen was such a charming cook that Hilda was pleased to watch her every movement. But Gwen did not relish such close scrutiny, and was fairly itching to get rid of her and finally summed up her thoughts in words.

"Now while I clean up this mess, Miss Harwood, you'd better take yourself off and look around. You will find mother and Lucy watering the garden by the creek, and presently I'll come, too," as she opened the door for Hilda.

"Where is the creek?"

"Go out that gate and follow the little path through the garden and you're there," Gwen answered.

Follow the path she did: a little, winding, natural kind of path, edged here and there with wild strawberry plants. Presently she found herself in the vegetable and fruit garden, on the banks of the Ferny creek, but no sign of Mrs. Rothsay or Lucy.

The little creek was lined with maidenhair fern, and the wattle blossom dipped its golden blooms into the water; a clematis vine had twisted about a huge stump and was in full bloom, making the air redolent of sweet odours.

Hilda sat down on a fallen log and looked around her. She had never been away in Nature's playground alone before. She had gone with fashion-

able parties to pretty and interesting watering places or tourists' haunts, but then a fashionable crowd, fashionable ejaculations, and fashionable formulas are gone through, even in the midst of Nature's grandeur, and the heart is left untouched. All this Hilda felt as she sat there with the scent of the earth and the wild flowers about her and the birds chirping their evening song above her head.

"I must go and find them or I will feel good in spite of myself," she thought. At that instant she heard the clink of buckets and in a few seconds they came in sight up through the bracken fern by a little zigzag path which led to the water's edge: the stately, lady-like mother, the handsome, gentle daughter; dresses tucked up about their waists, exposing their short petticoats to view, and each bearing two buckets of water up the difficult path.

There was a slight hesitation on Lucy's part when she saw Hilda. "Ah, you have caught us at our toil," she remarked with an easy grace as she passed. Hilda felt ill at ease standing there holding up her rich, silk gown.

Mrs. Rothsay felt something of her position and came at once to the rescue.

"We were sorry not to be in when you awoke, dear; I hope you had a nice little nap."

"Yes, thank you. Do you always do this work?" she asked.

"Oh dear, no. These are fresh plants and must be nourished until they get strong. It's Robert's

work, as a rule ; they are his plants, but he is away amongst the cattle, I think," she answered.

" Yes, Isabel is with him ; there they are," said Lucy, as Isabel and Robert came flying around the corner.

" Oh, whatever are they doing ? " Hilda cried in alarm. " Surely her horse has bolted ? "

" No, she is trying to head that bull. We will go in ; you may become alarmed, for they will pass this fence," Mrs. Rothsay said.

As they went they met the Justice and Hugh. " By Jove ! Did you see that, Hilda ? " cried Hugh in excitement, as Isabel headed the infuriated beast and struck it across the face with her heavy whip ; but his next words were cut short by an exclamation of horror, as the bull made a sudden charge full at Isabel's horse.

With cool courage and presence of mind she swerved her horse and leaped a three-railed fence just opposite to her. No sooner was she over than the bull leaped the fence after her, breaking the top rail as he did so. This gave Isabel her advantage ; hardly had the beast landed on the other side before she was beside it, bringing her whip down full force on its back. Bellowing fiercely, he made for the mob which Bob was driving, and so they got them into the yard ready for the market on the morrow, after a two hours' hard fight on horseback.

Not twenty minutes later Gwen rang the bell

for tea, and the Harwoods' astonishment was not the least mitigated when, a few minutes after, Isabel and Bob came in looking not the least as if they had been on a wild chase. Isabel, in her soft grey homespun dress, the same as the sisters were all wearing, looked handsomer still. Her cheeks were flushed, and she wore a red rose in her hair and dress.

"Miss Isabel," began the Justice, "by what witchery have you effected your toilet so soon?"

Isabel smiled. "Why, Justice, we have to do things in haste in the country, and besides I was anxious not to miss the light of your countenance any longer than I could help."

"Ah, young lady, I'll gratify your wish, besides returning the compliment," laughed the Justice, taking the seat opposite her.

"Miss Isabel, allow me to congratulate you on your splendid riding and management of animals," Hugh said, as he took his seat.

"Good gracious! You were never watching me, were you?"

"Most surely, and we were admiring your pluck."

Isabel crimsoned and Gwen laughed. "It's all right, Izy; they were too interested in your skill to notice mere details. The truth is, ladies and gentlemen, that when we help Bob with the stock at home we always wear an old skirt of mother's, worn back way front."

CHAPTER III

ISABEL

THAT evening, in the drawing-room, Hilda sat back and watched the girls moving gracefully about the room: now showing some photo or sketch; now an old pastel drawing done in the past by their mother; now an engraving done by their father. Then Gwen must show her collection of birds' eggs, fixed up artistically in a glass case; Bob's stuffed birds and skins of wild animals; then rare seaweed and shells from the Ninety-Mile Beach.

So many things were shown and explained without gush or conceit; but where the work belonged to another, then the real pride and love were not to be hidden.

But somehow Hilda felt it all keenly. Her pride was wounded. That morning she was Justice Harwood's fashionable daughter about to visit some very, very country people. Now it seemed that she was only plain Hilda Harwood, an atom of humanity. These girls that she thought to patronize were her equals in womanhood and ability; secretly, she felt them to be her superiors.

Hilda prided herself on her musical ability and readily rose when Lucy asked her to play and sing something.

She played off an opera with dash and style, then followed with a serenade. Her voice was a well-cultivated, clear soprano, but it lacked a subtle something. She sang with ability and precision, but the after strains, which one feels long after hearing a living song, were wanting. When she left the piano she felt her old fashionable self once more and as though she were on an equal footing with the Rothsay girls.

"Now, Miss Rothsay, we want to hear you," the Justice called out from the depths of an easy chair by the fire.

Bob arranged the music of a glee and all the young people sang; their voices accorded so splendidly that Mrs. Rothsay insisted on "Dame Durden." Hugh, who had a somewhat faulty voice, good-naturedly sang a hunting song, and then Lucy and Gwen sang a duet so sweetly and displayed so much musical ability that Hilda was damped once again.

"Does Isabel sing as well as Miss Rothsay and you?" Hilda questioned Gwen through the evening.

Gwen looked unutterable things then. "Isabel, my dear Hilda, is the coming Patti of Gippsland, if not of Australia."

"Does she really sing as well as that?"

Gwen leaned over and whispered, "Why, sometimes she makes me cry, and Bob——"

But Gwen did not state what Bob did, for that gentleman stood before them.

"Now, Gwen Rothsay, what does Bob do?" and he held her face in his palms and looked down on that glorious young freshness.

"She admires her big brother and wants him to coax Izy to sing."

Bob nodded and went to Isabel. "Izy dear, I want you to sing for us."

"Certainly, Bob," and she rose and walked over to the piano.

She sat there softly running over the prelude, and when she broke into "The Last Rose of Summer" the Harwoods were held spellbound. It was not the rich contralto voice, splendid range, or cultivation, although she possessed all three; it was the pathos, the mournful ring of the departing rose. It was as though she lived the song and was part of itself.

As the last note died away, in a tender lingering strain, Robert went to her and laid his hand on her shoulder. "You are in good voice to-night, sister mine," was all the comment he made, but there was a proud light in his fine eyes.

A beautiful bond of sympathy existed between these two; what hurt the one seemed to hurt the other equally.

Nobody thought to thank her for the song.

Such powerful singing had cast a spell too sacred to be broken by commonplace remarks.

“ Isabel dear, will you sing ‘ Annie Laurie ’ ? ” her mother asked.

“ With pleasure, mother,” and she struck the chord as she spoke and broke into the sweet old song as the skylark would. It was not a woman’s song, but the Justice and his children had never heard the poet’s old, thrilling song sung like it. Again she lived through the song, her rich voice rising and falling : now describing Annie Laurie’s charms and beauty, now the strength of his passion, then tenderly it seemed to float away and carry her little audience with it. Isabel slipped out as the last note died away. She had thrown her very soul into the song, as she rarely did in the presence of strangers, and now she must be alone. She had never consciously let her people hear her sing like that, she dared not trust herself before others. Rarely she practised her power even to herself. The pleasure was great at the time, but the vague restlessness and excitement which followed made it possible for her to refrain from a too frequent indulgence. Somehow they all breathed more freely when she had left the room.

Hilda forgathered with Gwen and Lucy.

“ Well ? ” asked Gwen, turning her bright eyes on Hilda’s face.

“ Oh ! ” was all the reply she made, a long smothered “ Oh ! ” but there were tears in her

eyes—real tears, and Gwen hugged her and the three went out arm in arm.

Robert was pale and restless, and he and Hugh went out for a smoke and walk in the moonlight.

Justice Harwood turned to Mrs. Rothsay when they had left the room.

“God grant all will be well with her!”

Mrs. Rothsay instinctively knew his meaning.

“Yes, my dear friend, I sometimes fear for her—so few understand her. Sometimes, when she thinks me asleep and the house is quiet, she will steal to the piano and sing so tenderly and softly at first, then she will forget herself and the house and me and the whole world, I think, everything but the song. Afterwards I have heard her, in her room, sob as though her heart would break. My poor passionate child!”

“Has she ever mentioned her intention of letting the world hear her?”

“No, no; but sometimes I’ve a vague unrest that that’s what is in her heart. Robert understands her and helps to keep her calm. We all love her,” she ended simply.

“Ah, would that I could call her daughter!” and Justice Harwood laid his hand tenderly on Mrs. Rothsay’s arm. “Somehow I’m in an unwonted excitement to-night; that child’s singing has brought back memories that can never die, and I do not want my Hugh to suffer what I did. Do you know that I have hopes that in coming here

that Hugh will make a choice? I would give all I possess to see Hugh and Isabel love each other."

"It would be good, Justice, but we cannot foretell their destinies. Isabel will never marry until she can give her whole heart to the man who loves her."

"Yes, and I'd rather see Hugh in his grave than marry a cold worldly woman. Friend, I fancy you guessed something of the bitterness of my life, but you did not know all. You heard of my marriage, the birth of my children and my wife's death. She was a good woman and loved me, but marriage with her ruined my life. I was only a struggling lawyer when you first knew me, and I fell in love with a carpenter's daughter. A second Isabel, but neither as strong in mind nor body as Isabel; but I loved her. I began to rise in my profession, and naturally got into swell society. My Nell could not mix with the set I was in, and we slowly drifted apart. I was flattered by the attentions of the smart set, and Nell began to look dowdy to me, and I neglected her so persistently that she saw nothing for it but to free me. I married the Hon. Hilda McGuinness—a brilliant match, everybody said—but from the hour of my marriage my heart was dead. Hilda loved me, but I think my coldness killed her love in time. After Hilda was born she was left very weak and did not regain her strength. About the same time I got a curt note from Nell's father asking me to come to the

house: Nell was dying and wished to see me. My Nell was dying and wished to forgive me. She died in my arms. I went back home ill and was laid up with brain fever for weeks. When I became sensible again Hilda looked ill and worn, and told me that I had told her everything in my delirium. I could say nothing to her that night and in the morning she was dead. The nervous strain of my illness had affected her heart, the doctor said, but I knew better. My baseness had broken her heart. Two good women and both dead through my worldly ambitions."

Justice Harwood looked up, his voice was husky.

The tears were slowly trickling down Mrs. Rothsay's face.

"Ah, I am sorry that I fretted your kind heart with my sorrows, but that child's face and singing have stirred me up strangely," and he rose and left the room as the girls came in, each bringing a tray with the supper things.

Gwen went in search of the men, and presently came back with them. Isabel came in looking pale, but it was not long before her colour came back. Indeed, they all seemed to vie with one another in their efforts to be entertaining and succeeded so effectually that one could not imagine a happier-looking party.

It was with a hearty handshake that Robert and Hugh parted for the night.

"By Jove! he's a stunning good fellow," was

Bob's comment as he kicked off his boots. "I only wish I had some fellows about here like him. I'm half inclined to fancy already that he has designs on Isabel. What a proud, handsome bit of goods the lady Hilda is! Ah well, I'm not so sure what she'll turn out a decent sort of a girl after she's been under the mater's and girls' care for a few days."

And Bob fell asleep and dreamt that Hilda and he were riding on the elephant in the Melbourne Zoo and that Hilda was rattling a tambourine, and he awoke with the ring-a-ting-ting of the alarm clock.

The sun was high in the heavens when Hugh awoke. He did not attempt to sleep until the magpies were trilling their first wild notes, so much came crowding into his brain. These friends of his had opened a new page in his hitherto monotonous existence. "What a grand fellow Bob is, despite his labours on a farm," and with many complimentary phrases he soon dismissed the whole family and gave his mind up to analysing Isabel. Then he began making mental comparisons between her and Lallah Rencliffe. Just one short week ago he thought Lallah the acme of perfection, that is if he troubled to think of her at all. He had flirted with her in a careless fashion. He did not even contradict the many friends who coupled their names together, in fact was not sufficiently interested. He just drifted along like so many

business men do through their daily business routine and their one set round of pleasures, hoping that something will turn up to change the tide of their affairs; if not, then they accept their fate and never know the real joy to be derived from true love.

And what of Isabel? One had only to watch her radiant face to know that, whatever the state of her heart, her nocturnal repose had been undisturbed, save by the sweetest of visitations. She made no individual exception regarding her new friends. Indeed, taking it on the whole, she was more delighted at the prospect of Hilda's friendship. Although several little things in Hilda's conversation hurt her pride, nothing tangible, nothing ill-bred, yet a certain manner Hilda had of keeping her inferiors at a distance, still it seemed a pleasant streak of sunshine in their lives to have such visitors.

CHAPTER IV

HUGH

“GOOD MORNING, lazybones,” said Hugh, catching sight of Hilda in the morning.

“Here, hold, you jackanapes,” the Justice called out, simultaneously leaving his room. “May I ask how you have been employing your energies?”

“Birds of a feather,” laughed Hilda. “But where are they all? I haven’t heard a sound.”

“There goes a whip cracking,” said Hugh. “I’m off. Jove! but I feel different.”

“This trip will be the life of Hugh,” remarked the Justice, as they, too, started on a voyage of discovery.

They found everything fresh and sweet. A retinue of servants could not have had better order.

They found Gwen in the dairy, in a fresh holland dress and white apron, skimming clotted cream. Mrs. Rothsay was attending to her chicks, and Lucy had her fair arms full of freshly cut rye, passing it over the fence to half a dozen sleek-looking cows, who were horning each other for first place.

How pleasant and clock-like everything appeared

to the Harwoods! Had they risen with the first streak of dawn and bustled so that they might have leisure to attend to their guests, perhaps they would have adopted a different tune.

Isabel and Bob came in shortly after, attired for riding. Hilda felt a jealous pang as she noted the country girl's faultlessly fitting, dark blue, tailor-made habit, neat boxer hat and riding gloves.

What a lithe, handsome creature Isabel did look, but not handsomer, she thought, than Bob in his riding corduroys. And these were the people she would never consent to meet in her home. She felt very small this morning as Bob turned and held out his hand.

"I'm sorry we have to leave you this morning, Miss Harwood; it's unavoidable. We are stock-driving, but we will arrange a ride shortly," he said courteously.

"Stockdriving?" asked Hugh, as he too came into the room.

"Yes, those you saw us yarding yesterday," Bob answered.

Hugh looked at Isabel. "Oh, Isabel always helps me on sale days."

"Are you shocked, Miss Harwood?" asked Isabel.

"Oh, no," she answered, reddening, "only it does not seem the thing for a wom—lady."

"Ah, we have to do a great many unconventional things on this farm," Isabel said quietly.

As she left the room Hugh came up with her. "Miss Isabel, I do wish you would let me come too."

Isabel's face brightened. "I wish you could too, but we're late as it is; do you both ride?"

"If you had asked me a few days ago I would have answered in the affirmative, but not since seeing you ride," he answered.

"You forget that half our life is spent in the saddle, or a good part of our time, so that it is nothing wonderful whatever," she said as Bob helped her into the saddle.

A few minutes later they were away with fifty head of wild young cattle. They had some hard riding and fighting with the herd before they succeeded in getting them over the cross-roads.

To the guests the morning sped away. Hilda and Lucy got on famously. Dear little Gwen teased Hugh to her heart's content, and then beguiled the Justice into a fishing expedition down the little creek. Hugh went into the dairy and helped Mrs. Rothsay churn the cream which Gwen had skimmed that morning, although, if the truth must be told, his mind was very differently employed. By dint of a few careless questions put to Mrs. Rothsay, he gleaned that Isabel might be expected at every minute. She usually only helped Bob as far as the sale yards, and then he would send her back.

Hugh was quite interested in the development of the cream, more especially as he had his eye on

a basin of fresh sweet buttermilk as a reward for his exertions, and was in the act of draining the last drop of that delicious beverage when he saw Isabel, from the little dairy window, pass round to the stables.

Instantly he ran out. "Oh, Miss Isabel, I am sorry, I really meant to open the gate; the fact is, you can blame that dairy of yours."

Isabel drew rein at the stable door and smiled. "Been at the cream, I suppose?"

"No, buttermilk," he answered, putting up his arms to help her down.

Isabel placed her hands on his shoulders, just the slightest touch and was down before Hugh realized the fact.

Nevertheless, in that one brief second that the girl's strong hands rested on his shoulders, the whole current of Hugh's life changed and left him standing there pale and helpless, watching Isabel as she led her horse into the stable.

"Forgive my tardiness, Miss Isabel," and with a dexterity that would have done credit to a professional groom, Hugh had the saddle and bridle off. There was feed in the stall, so Isabel led the way out, to be met half-way to the house by half a dozen poddy calves, who were butting about her as though they resented Hugh's presence.

"Hey, you scallywags, didn't Gwen feed you?" asked Isabel, giving them a shove with the butt end of her whip.

Hugh, in his innocence of calfology, put his hand out and kindly stroked one of the scallywag's nose. Instantly the calf seized it in his mouth and began sucking for dear life.

"Hoo! you brute!" yelled Hugh. "Go away!" But the brute took a firmer grip.

Isabel stood there helpless with laughter. The sight of Hugh with his hand almost to the wrist in the poddy's mouth, kicking at it vigorously and at the same time trying to keep the sticky, slimy saliva from getting on his clothes, was altogether too much for her equanimity. Seeing that they had grabbed his other hand and were making for his patent leather slippers, she came to the rescue and drove them off.

The moment he was free he made a dash for the house, with the six poddies at his heels.

As Isabel looked after him there dawned in her mind for the first time since his visit, and perhaps in her life, a faint awakening of interest in his sex.

She smiled to herself as she went into the house. Already the Harwoods had caught them doing a great many things that young ladies are not supposed to do, and yet what did it matter after all? There and then she mentally resolved that not one of her duties should be left undone because of the city folk. Her pride was up in arms at the bare thought. The Justice and Gwen came back with several mountain trout and both set to work and prepared them for dinner.

"Hilda, my dear," her father said at the close of an excellent dinner, "I do trust that you will persuade the girls to give you some of their recipes. I have never tasted finer cooking."

"Yes, indeed, papa; I have been going a step ahead of that, mentally, for I've decided to get them to teach me something of the art, if they will."

"Will you?" she asked, looking direct at Isabel.

"With the greatest pleasure, but I should think you are better up in cooking than ourselves."

"You forget, Miss Rothsay," returned Hilda, forgetting herself as she drew her head up proudly. "There has never been any occasion for me to go into a kitchen."

Her father's and Hugh's face crimsoned. "No, my daughter, I have worked too hard to keep you out of it, but remember your day is not run yet."

She had never remembered her father giving her so angry an answer, but never to his mind or Hugh's had she so forfeited her right to a gentle one. Her speech was careless rather than arrogant.

Nevertheless, it rankled in the girls' hearts, and more especially in their gentle mother's. Hilda was quick to perceive that they were too well bred to make any outward sign, and made a firm resolve to herself to try and emulate them.

Little light-hearted Gwen never left anybody long in the shadows; before they knew where they

were she had them all. Her mirth and playfulness were irresistible.

Even Hugh's frown, left by his sister's speech, was banished, and a paper cap and big canvas apron tied on him. Then Gwen danced around him, clapping her hands. "Oh, Hugh! Hugh! you'd make a cat die to see you; and to think that I was ever stupid enough to want to flirt with you! Oh dear, it's too funny!" and Gwen threatened to go off again.

"Here, hold!" cried Hugh with mock gravity. "You wished to flirt with me?"

"Yes, I did, before you came."

"Well," laughed Hugh, "why don't you now?"

"Why, I've seen you now," demurely answered Gwen.

Hugh made a dart at her, but she was too nimble. With one bound she was off and Hugh after her, both making the old place ring with their laughter. He almost had her once as they ran through the milking shed, but Gwen made a flying leap and landed on the very brink of the creek. She did not hesitate a moment, although the creek was fairly deep at that spot and only a very slim, slimy, moss-covered log to cross on.

While Hugh looked on in consternation she had reached the bank and deliberately sat down on a tussock and dared him to follow.

She looked such a sweet bit of impertinence

sitting there, with her dancing eyes and sunny face, that Hugh could not resist the temptation to be on equal terms with her. But it was a more slippery business than he had bargained for, and before his second foot touched the moss-covered log, it was a case of slip, slide, and in.

One second and Gwen was helping him up the opposite bank, a few more and she was tugging him into the house. "Help there! I've found a frozen rat," she called out, but her face looked terribly serious.

"Never mind your questions now," as they crowded inquiringly around her. "Justice, march that boy straight to bed."

Hugh protested, but he was shivering.

"Hugh Harwood, do as I say at once. I got you into this scrape and I've got to get you out," Gwen said severely, and presently she was knocking outside his door with hot water and brandy.

He drank it down and was fast asleep in twenty minutes, to testify to Gwen's generous nip.

Lucy looked in an hour later and gave him a book to while away the time, while the others, with the exception of Isabel, who was cooking, were having a game of tennis.

Isabel was glad to get rid of their guests while the cooking was going on. There was so much to do in the next hour that it was an infinite relief to know Hugh was safe in his room. The women of the farmhouse had a decided objection to being

stared at, partly the outcome of the secluded life they led.

But Hugh wanted to find out what Isabel was doing and made his way to the kitchen. She was over the fire, stirring that mysterious compound known as cream puffs, when he appeared at the door.

He stood watching her as she deftly turned the thick iron spoon around and around the great saucepan. "That looks hard work," he said, coming forward and taking the spoon out of her hand.

"Mr. Harwood, give me the spoon quickly; if I stop stirring one second, they will be ruined."

"Well, then, I won't stop," answered Hugh as he stirred away. Presently his arms began to ache. "I say, how much longer does this stuff want churning?"

"It's right now, but don't you think you will be better off in the dining-room?"

"No, I don't; I'm going to help you."

Isabel made the best of a bad bargain and made him whip the cream for the puffs and rewarded him with a glass of milk and some of the identical puffs. It was pleasanter than she could have imagined to have him helping her. He looked so homely perched up on the end of the table, and really it was not such an ordeal after all having a visitor in the kitchen.

Had Isabel been less practical, she would have enjoyed Hugh's society far more, but being both

practical and conscientious she had her mind well occupied with her domestic arrangements.

Hugh watched her move about, and wondered if the society butterflies in his set had ever done such useful things as Isabel was doing now. And yet she was the finest specimen of gentlewoman he had ever met.

Isabel had accepted the situation and was making the best of it, but Hugh was scarcely prepared for her next remark: "Mr. Harwood, I am going to cut feed for the cows now; are you coming too?"

As she passed out the little gate she fed the fowls, and without the slightest embarrassment she led the way across the rye paddock, took up the scythe, and with a dexterity born of long practice had a few big bundles cut while Hugh was still catching his breath.

"Miss Rothsay, allow me; this is no work for you."

Isabel took no notice of his remark except to contract her brows for a moment. The scythe swung around and cut again and yet again, was replaced and she was gathering up the bundles, while Hugh was still in a flummox to know what to do or say to this proud creature.

She arranged six bundles. "Now you can carry those to the cows if you like," she said.

"Of course I will, but what a helpless cad you must think me to stand here and let you cut that!" Hugh answered, with his face ablaze.

Isabel burst out laughing. "Good gracious! you would never think that I would let you spoil Bob's scythe, surely? Oh, no, it is no trouble or labour whatever for me to cut the rye, and Bob can't possibly do everything. He has never let us milk a cow except when he has been ill, and he is the very best and dearest brother in the whole world," she added, lowering her voice.

Hugh thought he had never seen so beautiful a face as hers. Just at that moment the setting sun made her face radiant, catching her as it did with the light of sisterly love shining in her eyes and softening the curves of her mouth. As he watched her he was surprised at the change that passed swiftly across her face. With her head thrown proudly back, an empress could not have looked more imperial. He suspected the cause, and was just in time to catch Hilda's disdainful stare as the whole group came up.

"Oh, Hugh, were you and Miss Rothsay wagering for a trial of skill? Why did you let her cut down that grass?"

Isabel answered for both, with a slight raising of her eyebrows. "I cut that rye, Miss Harwood, to save your brother from cutting his feet, and because it is my daily work."

She was sorry to hurt Hugh's feelings, and she gave him a kindly glance as she hurried in to meet Bob.

There are natures and natures in this world of ours, but as a rule you will find the truest natures

are reared up on the soil, breathing the pure country air and beholding Nature in all her moods. Nature lends itself to the upward tendency of a character. There are fewer temptations, more restful scenes, which must tranquillize the mind to some extent and help the individual.

You can be as inartistic and unpoetical as you please, and yet the sights and sounds in the country leave an unconscious impression. The customs and habits which play such an important part in our everyday life are as wholly different in city and country as the planets are far apart. And yet each lot is the outcome of habit. The country cousins, though such gawks and so outlandish when visiting the city, are really no more so than the cityites when in the country. If it were not for habit, we would be shocked at thousands of things that we witness now with pleasure.

A country woman visiting the seaside was making her way to the pier, dressed very old-fashioned and dowdy, much to the amusement of a fashionable party, who were watching her through their glasses. As she came up, a giggle drew her attention. "Lord-a-mercy!" she cried, "whatever is that?" pointing to a much befrizzled, powdered, and overdressed creature tittering before her. "It's no a woman, and yet maybe it's ane o' em puir critters out o' ther asylum."

Their styles were entirely new to each other, but perfectly familiar to their respective sets. Custom and habit tone down many things in time.

CHAPTER V

MICHAEL MACCAFFEY

THAT there was a suggestion of jealousy in Hilda's treatment of the girls, Isabel particularly, was quite apparent to a close observer, and she knew it herself, and had been struggling against it half the afternoon; but now she fully decided that they were her equals and she would not show her ugly side again. Besides, she heartily admired them and meant to have them reciprocate if it lay in her power. Nevertheless, even with such a resolution in view, it galled her pride to know that where she expected dull, countrified awkwardness, she only found culture and excellence.

When Hilda had once come to a decision, it was final. She rarely acted on impulse, and once she made up her mind to like anybody she did it thoroughly.

Once again they were ensconced in the old-fashioned drawing-room, after the day's work was done. Bob was showing the Justice some of his mechanical drawings, much to that gentleman's

surprise ; for although they knew now that he was a gentleman and fairly well educated, still they did not know that he was ambitious or possessed the ability which the drawings displayed.

Hilda was sitting quietly looking on. " I thought that nobody but an individual of a mechanical turn of mind was interested in that class of drawings ? " she remarked.

" Well," said Bob, " how do you know I'm not ? "

" I don't know at all, but I thought you were only a farmer," she answered, reddening.

" I'm very much afraid that Robert's ambition soars above an ordinary farmer's life," his mother replied.

" No, mother, not beyond ; it's the healthiest, happiest life there is, but I must confess to a desire to get out of the actual drudgery ; and even you, mother, would not have me hide my light under a bushel," he added lightly.

" I say, old fellow, what are we to expect from that ? I declare, after the many eye-openers we've had these two last days, that I'm feeling small, to say the least. But seriously, what line do you mean to adopt ? "

" Well, I hardly know yet. In the first place, I'm slightly handicapped."

Mrs. Rothsay sighed audibly. " Now, mother ! " and he took her hand in his, " you misunderstand me. The work doesn't handicap me in the slightest degree, but we're under the disadvantage of being

so far away from a good class-room," he added, addressing Hugh; "but I take a flying visit to the city occasionally, and that helps me wonderfully."

"Then what instruction do you actually get?" asked the Justice.

"Instruction by correspondence. A Melbourne man takes me for electrical engineering and one in New York for chemistry."

"What a learned person you will be!" laughed Hilda, "and pray, what about your exams?"

"Oh, they are all right so far," Lucy answered for him; "he has passed his second year with honours."

Hugh whistled. "By Jove! old man; I'm afraid you can knock me kite-high."

"Oh, nonsense! you see I like the work, so it's a recreation instead of a labour."

"Jove! but that's all right. I say, dad, just you imagine me finding recreation in law study?"

"Then depend upon it, my dear Mr. Hugh, it is not your vocation in life. My contention is, that when a man finds his vocation, there is more pleasure than labour in the fulfilling of it," Mrs. Rothsay said.

"Precisely, Mrs. Rothsay, your humble servant's opinion," answered Hugh, with a meaning look at her and a side glance at his father, which, however, was lost on that gentleman, who was in an animated discussion with Bob on the present

electrical system and its advantage over steam.

"Robert, my son, have you allowed your guests a peep into your room yet?"

"Hey, mother! no. Bob, have you put back the counterpane yet, and are all your ~~sox~~ hidden from view, and is that infernal machine moved from the door yet?"

"Gwen, Gwen, my dear, I'm shocked at you."

"Well, mother, who has more need of taking precautions than myself? Hilda, my dear, I'll tell you; you have the most brains. I went away for a holiday once, and the first visit I paid Bob's room when I came back I planked my shoe right into some cage affair near the door, and it went whiz, just like an alarm clock. I pulled and tugged, and the wretched thing whizzed, and at last I had to sit down and wriggle out of the shoe. I went into his room in my slippers to make his bed; he had a lot of things which were not there before I went away, one queer thing up on the wall with a button sticking out. Well, I just touched the old button and away it went like the other, whiz! whiz! The wind caught my apron and blew it towards the thing, and next thing I knew I was caught in it and my apron tore in ribbons before I got free; and then mother says she is shocked at me," concluded Gwen indignantly.

"I declare, Gwen, you are making me curious to see this mysterious room," said Hilda.

It was indeed a unique room to find in a farm-

house. The floor was covered; a single bed, washstand and dressing-table were the contents of its furniture, and these were crammed away in a corner with inartistic effect. Under the window ran a long bench the length of the room, with two shelves high above. One was filled with chemicals, the other with books on engineering, the bench for experiments and working models. Bob passed many a night in that room alone with his books and instruments.

"Well, Robert my boy, you are to be congratulated," said Justice Harwood, when they had inspected everything. "You have indeed been industrious; it is simply marvellous, considering your drawbacks."

"Oh, I don't know; as mother says, I think I have found my vocation; besides, I was well advanced in mathematics at school, and that is one of the essentials of the study."

"Robert Rothsay," said Gwen, prancing around him like a clown, "you are a very modest child, but take care, for I might tell of your wonderful castles of by and by, and how everywhere your future visitors like to step they will be confronted by an electrical contrivance to hurry them off the premises." And with much laughter at Gwen's speech they went back to the fire.

The visit to Bob's room was a pleasant diversion. Hilda took a new interest in him. She was finding him quite a pleasant study.

" May I ask what you are thinking of, Miss Harwood, sitting there so quietly ? " asked Bob, coming up.

Hilda flushed, but did not answer. " Come now, that's a bit ungenerous after I showed my wares too."

" If you want the truth, I was thinking of you," she answered, returning his smile.

" That was good of you. May I inquire the direction they took ? "

Hilda laughed a pleasant laugh, so Bob mentally concluded. He could not have given her credit for so fine and hearty a laugh before.

" Do you want the truth again ? " she asked.

" Most decidedly."

" Then it was that you are an enigma to me," she answered more seriously.

Bob's laugh rang out so heartily that it disturbed Lucy's song, and he had to apologize, and did not get a chance again that evening of renewing his conversation with her, much to his disappointment. The thought of his being an enigma to anybody was very amusing to him. He had enjoyed the few minutes' conversation with her immensely, and Hilda herself was watching for its renewal.

Her uncouth country clown was turning out a man of resolution and would not make an undesirable friend. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps, after all, he might not think that she was conferring a favour on him, and, like a woman, at

once determined to try and gain his friendship. Presently they were all drawn into a wild Highland song which Bob was making them enjoy. Just as they began the last verse, the Harwoods were startled by the sound of a horse galloping up to the door ; but to their surprise their hostess did not take the slightest notice beyond a smile, and Bob continued the song. They were all well in the chorus before he took breath to shout, " Come away, Mick ! come right in."

Mick swaggered in, joining in the chorus as he came.

Justice Harwood had his back to the door, singing with gusto ; but Hilda and Hugh caught the first glimpse of Mick as he tumbled in amongst them, for his mode of entrance was nothing else.

Hugh grasped the situation at once, but Hilda shrank back half in fear that he was some desperado. Hugh came over and whispered, " Don't be alarmed ; only a Queensland bushwhacker." Instantly she was reassured, recalling Hugh's account of them after his trip to Bananaland. But Mick was no bushwhacker of Queensland. " A Gippsland cockie " was his own designation of himself. Moreover, he was an Irish native, blue-eyed and curly-headed, with a broad nose and typical, merry Irish face, thick set and under thirty. But his dress and attitude made him look an oddity on first acquaintance. He wore a huge wideawake, striped moleskins, leggings and long-necked spurs, a greasy

green coat, red tie, and a large yellow flower in his buttonhole. A large square locket dangled from a silver chain, and he was splashed with mud from head to foot.

The sight of the visitors did not abash him, for Bob had told him of them at the sale yards, and he had taken the earliest opportunity of calling on their account. He felt somewhat perturbed to know that Isabel was in the close vicinity of a city man, and although he knew that she would never marry him, he had quite made up his mind that "no city snob would." He wanted to find out "just why that bloke had come sneaking about the farm."

So it was with rather a masterful style that Mick entered, with his hat far back and his hands deep down in his trousers pockets.

Mrs. Rothsay gave him a pleasant nod. He returned her a side shake of the head, and when the song was ended, walked to the fireplace and spat into the glowing coals.

Hilda could scarcely suppress her laughter.

"Hulloa, Mick, old boy!" let me introduce you to our friends."

"By golly, Bob, and the friends will have to wait or the steam will run out. Come on, fire away; give it lip!"

They understood him and began from the beginning of the song, and Mick joined lustily in.

The Harwoods were songless. The sight of

Mick standing there with his chest thrown out, hat on, hands still in his pockets, and singing at the top of his tuneless voice, was very comical to them, and they could not take their eyes off him. But immediately the song was ended, Mick turned the tables and gazed straight in Hugh's face.

"Mick, this is Justice Harwood, Mr. Harwood and Miss Harwood," Bob said.

"And all the little Harwoods," responded Mick, and he walked over to the fireplace and deliberately spat the introduction into the fire.

The last fairly broke Hilda and Hugh up, and they laughed heartily. But Mick had been taught little of politeness and cared less, and besides, "he was not going to make an ass of himself until he saw how the land lay." Therefore he drew up a chair in front of "the old bloke" (as he always afterwards called the Justice), but he did not attempt to remove his hat. Mick never put himself out in that fashion.

"So you're the bloke who tried Billy Bell, ain't you?"

Justice Harwood stiffened perceptibly and looked sternly at Mick, but did not answer. Mick looked disgusted, but continued: "Yes, and a pretty mess you made of it. A parcel of old women could do better. My born jimnie! I'd rather dig spuds for a livin' than talk such rot as some of you fellows do."

Justice Harwood was struggling between offended

dignity and amusement, and the latter won, for he broke into a hearty laugh.

"But, my man, do you know anything of the case whatever?" he added.

"Well, that's good too. Didn't I read up all about the flamin' case, and didn't I used to know him, and don't I know him now?" he asked sarcastically.

"Well! what was your verdict?"

"Five years," Mick answered promptly.

"You would condemn him to five years on circumstantial evidence?"

"Circumstantial fools! I tell you he stole the cattle," cried Mick excitedly.

"Indeed! who is your authority? for if you read the case you must know that we found the man not guilty," said the Justice, as though to end the subject.

But Mick would not be dismissed. He had rehearsed the dialogue riding home from the sale yards and meant "that Isabel should see him take the city fops down a peg or two."

He brought his chair round until he faced the Justice again, then pulled out a short black pipe, put it in one corner of his mouth and spoke impressively through his teeth.

"Michael Maccaffey mightn't be much to look at, but them that knows him knows he's a terror to go, and there's no white in his eye either."

'I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that what

Mick says is absolutely and positively true," Bob said with a dramatic wave of his hand and a significant gaze at the others to keep their laughter within bounds.

"Here now, Bob, call off. I've got this here chair. I'm dealin' with the prisoner and mean to wipe him off singlehanded."

This was too much. Even the Justice fairly roared. Mick laughed too, but much as though he were conferring a favour.

"I was always a bit of a comic," he resumed, turning to the Justice. "I've seen a whole room fairly bust their sides at me, but I'm not in the humour to-night. However, let's to the case in hand."

"Yes, your Honour," answered Justice Harwood, entering the humour of the thing.

"Well now, what would you say if I told you that he did steal those cattle?"

"You have already said so, but I want proof," answered the Justice.

"I'm the proof; I seen him steal them."

"You!"

"Yes, me!"

"Then why did you not come forward and prove it at the trial?"

"You don't think I'm such a bloomin' chump, do you? You don't know much, although you are a Judge. That fellow has a wife and two dear little kids; do you think I'd give him away? Not

much. I hate the fellow ; he done me a dirty turn once ; but Mick Maccaffey will never get a man in chokey."

"How do you know that I will not use what you said against him ? "

"Pah ! do you think I'm ratty ? I'll tell you why, because you're under Mrs. Rothsay's roof, and Bob saw him too, so you wouldn't bring him into it," said Mick in a softer tone.

Justice Harwood eyed him keenly. With all his roughness here he was demanding courtesy for Mrs. Rothsay.

Presently Mick's eyes wandered to Isabel's and gave her such an appealing look that the Justice gripped the whole position. He read Mick's heart, and inwardly forgave him much of what he took to be pure spitefulness a few minutes before.

He turned to Bob. "Robert, you saw this man Bell steal the cattle too ? "

"Oh yes, we both saw him. We never mentioned it before, and I hope you will not again, Mick. The fellow seems to be doing well now, and any reference to the past might only stir up his old ways again."

"Certainly, certainly, and you may rely on me," Justice Harwood answered hastily.

Mick expanded his chest and strode over to Isabel. "Well, I'm glad I got that off my chest," he said.

"Why did you get it on there at all, Mick ? you

should not have told Justice Harwood about the poor fellow," Isabel said firmly.

"It seems the only thanks a fellow gets is, 'why did you?' I did it to open your eyes and to show you that you can't lick the country with all your city fops,"

"I don't understand you," Isabel answered.

"I tell you them city blokes know nothin' worth knowin', as I've just showed you, and I'll show you more too, you'll see if I don't; and then if any girl friend of mine goes and hangs up to them, it will be with her peepers open," he said meaningly.

He had adored Isabel since she was a school girl, and lately he had on more than one occasion begged her to be his wife. She had had a sensible talk with him and forbade future hopes of such a possibility. She thought a great deal of him, as they all did, but anything further was an impossibility to a cultured woman.

Poor Mick! As he left her side he caught an amused look which Hugh threw her, and then he was merciless.

"This your first visit to Gippsland?" he asked him carelessly.

"Yes."

"What do you think of the country about here?" asked Mick.

"Very fine indeed. I envy you fellows up here immensely with your horses and dogs," answered Hugh.

Mick's eyes sparkled. "Horses? do you know anything about them?"

"Oh, I know a good horse when I see one."

"By golly, then you must see my little mare. I'll bring her around to-morrow, and you can have a go at some of Bob's hurdles," he drolled out slowly.

Isabel, who was watching, caught the sound and came over.

"Mick Maccaffey, what do you mean by that? You know very well that you can scarcely manage her yourself, and that Mr. Harwood is only a city man and does not know anything of horses whatever, and we do not want doctors here, thank you."

He looked to see if she meant it, and was reassured by her earnest look. His face brightened. He was overjoyed to think that he had made her realize his importance at last.

"By golly, Isabel! but you are about right; them city coves don't know much about our ways, do they? Not that you mightn't be a clever cuss in your own line," he added kindly to Hugh.

CHAPTER VI

"OLD EMERALD"

THERE was no need to wait breakfast this second morning. Hilda was up so early that she had to tiptoe out for fear of awaking the rest. She felt full of life and vigour and ever so happy. All the old, discontented feeling had gone. Once she got outside the house, she made quickly towards the creek, where she had sat the first day of her visit.

The place looked lovelier than ever. The early morning lent a misty softness to the sky and water and ferns. She sat down on a fallen log, but only for a few minutes. She was too full of life and animal spirits to stop still long. She set off for a walk along the creek at a good pace, but the fear of some wild-looking animals drove her back to her favourite spot, but was too restless to stay there; she hardly knew how to contain herself. She kept her eye on the house, hoping that Gwen would soon appear; but Gwen was glad of every second's sleep that she could snatch.

The house looked dreadfully quiet and still now ;

she wished she had looked at the time. Presently her eyes fell on a haystack, with a ladder propped against it. "The very thing," she said with a chuckle. "Why, I'm like a schoolgirl this morning ; but I believe that stack is just what I have been searching for all this while."

She carefully surveyed the house and then proceeded to mount the ladder. Her dress caught, she got down again and proceeded to turn it up about her waist and was soon up. "Oh, how delightful this hay smells ! I wonder what's come over me, but really I believe I'd rather be here than in the finest conservatory in Melbourne. Now I wonder if—ahem !—Robert had anything to do with the building of this stack ? "

Hilda lay down full length in the sweet soft hay, with her arms above her head, and fell to thinking of Robert.

It was a habit of Bob's, when he wanted to run the horses in before breakfast (provided they were not within sight), to mount the stack and locate them before setting out.

He had promised Hugh a ride after breakfast, so ran lightly up the ladder and leapt on to the stack, almost at Hilda's feet.

"Cæsar's ghost ! Miss Harwood ! "

Hilda jumped up with a burning face and looked at him ; then they both burst out laughing.

"However did you get here ? " asked Bob.

"However did you get here?" asked Hilda.

"Up the ladder," answered Bob.

"Well, I got up the ladder too."

"But——" commenced Bob.

"I believe you thought I could not go where you could?"

"No—not exactly, but I didn't think you would venture up here without assistance. You see, you are not used to the country yet," he added apologetically.

"Well, you will see that I possess adaptability; for instance, look at my skirt pinned about my waist, and all out of shape too."

Bob laughed. "I declare it does look homely, but you look fine this morning." He shot a glance at her general appearance, and looked as though he approved very much.

Just then Gwen spied them and ran up. "Oh, Hilda, how lovely you do look! You don't look the same girl."

Hilda blushed. "It's your own eyes, Gwen. Everything looks lovely this morning."

"Then you are not missing your friends terribly," answered Bob.

"I have no very particular friends," she answered carelessly.

"No one particular friend?"

"No."

"Then I am glad. You'll enjoy your holiday all the more," he answered shortly. "Now if you

two girls will get down I'll look for the horses," he said, to save Hilda embarrassment.

Although he spoke carelessly, his heart was thumping. Why, he did not know. He ridiculed the self-suggested idea that it was because of Hilda. "I'm not such a ridiculous idiot as all that, I hope. Pah! a girl I've only seen for two days, and inclined to be red at that."

Nevertheless, at the breakfast table he found himself watching her and taking delight in her bright manner. They were all struck with the change in her.

Justice Harwood took most joy in Hugh's improvement and evident interest in Isabel, and felt himself younger and happier than he had done for years.

"This is the merriest meal we've had yet," said Lucy.

"Yes, and the hungriest too," said Gwen dolefully. "Hugh Harwood has had at least a dozen helpings of ham and eggs and five rounds of toast, and now he's got his eye on the toast plate again. Bob, you will have to invent an electrical contrivance to make the toast with."

"Well, Gwen, I'll help you," said Hugh; "but if you will have queer visitors who half kill a body laughing, why, you must expect enormous appetites—the two are contingent, you know."

"Have you many more like Michael Maccaffey?" asked the Justice, turning to Mrs. Rothsay.

"Oh yes, I think there are a great many more

in Gippsland, and I'm very proud to think it, for he is a fine, staunch character.”

“ You evidently share Miss Isabel's opinion of his greatness,” laughed Hugh.

“ Well, yes, we all think well of Mick. He has been our friend for years, and a very sincere friend too,” she answered.

“ Oh, but he was too funny ! I nearly screamed laughing at the style of him, and he treated papa as if he were a child,” said Hilda.

“ That's his way. He is proud in his own way and resents being patronized, but his heart isn't queer. He once saved my brother's life,” Isabel said with more animation than Hugh liked to see displayed for such a clown. But Mick went up in Hilda's estimation by leaps and bounds.

“ What a fine fellow he must be, after all ; she would get him alone and find out all about it.” But her thoughts were interrupted by that gentleman shooting past the window.

“ Y'up ? ” called out Mick as he came in. “ Morn-in', everybody ; how wags the enemy ? ”

“ Mick, sit down and take some breakfast.” Mrs. Rothsay patted the chair by her side.

“ Don't mind if I do.”

“ This is an early visit, Mick ; what's in the wind ? ” asked Bob.

“ Well, I thought that these blokes here might like to have a look at Old Emerald Farm, and I thought I'd like to have their opinion on them

grunTERS I bought yesterday, for they're as nice a looking lot as ever I see."

Hilda was trying to hold herself in check and succeeded in looking interested.

"Perhaps the young woman would like to come along too? I thought of her and brought the trap along."

"Oh, indeed, I would like to go very much, thank you," she said graciously.

Mick looked pleased. "Well, now, that's what I call a straight answer for a town girl."

Bob threw him a grateful look as he went to milk, and Hugh helped Mick with the horses.

Mick drove the elderly people with Lucy and Gwen, much to his disappointment; but the Justice and Gwen had arranged the mode of travelling, so nothing could be said.

Hilda was wild with delight. She looked well on a horse, but was unused to the saddle and was rather nervous. Hugh had taken Bob's horse and astonished them all with his horsemanship, for he was nearly as well acquainted with horses as they. Isabel could not be coaxed far from the buggy, she was obeying the pleading of Mick's eyes.

Old Emerald Farm, as Mick called his place, was a fine farm, one of the richest about the locality. The house itself was old and dilapidated, and the interior very "bachelor" indeed; papers, whips, saddles, harness, spurs, horns lying about the floor, loads of ashes in the big fireplace and fat and grease

spilt about confronted the visitors, but Mick did not keep them long in the house. He was too anxious to show his stock, which the men could not but admire, for he was a prize taker at several of the local shows, both for his shorthorns and his Berkshire pigs.

After a full inspection he took them across the fields to see one of his neighbours—a kind, motherly old soul who could not do enough for them. She supported herself by the profits of a poultry farm, and the incubators, which she was using, were regulated by a patent of Bob’s, and so made the visit more interesting to the visitors. The regulator, which went with the incubators, did not work satisfactorily, and he came to her assistance and succeeded in making an atmospheric one to keep the machines at the required heat. She was full of praise and gratitude for his timely help.

“Robert, if you will take the gentlemen to see my poultry yards and you girls will set a bit of lunch, I will take Miss Harwood to see my ducklings,” she said in her homely fashion.

“Set lunch! Pugh! you’re a real nasty old woman,” exclaimed Gwen. “Next time I come to see you, you’ll show me the ducklings, I’ll warrant.”

“Oh dearie me! what have I done now?” said Mrs. Gray anxiously. But Gwen ran up and threw her arms around the old lady’s neck.

“Bless her heart,” she said, kissing Gwen; “she’s my sunshine, that’s what she is.”

With Mick's help the girls soon had their basket unpacked and prepared the luncheon, and in the meanwhile Mrs. Gray and Hilda were getting on fast.

"And how long have you been with Mrs. Rothsay, dear?" she asked.

"Just a few days, but they have been very happy ones," she answered. The old lady looked at her sharply, and Hilda blushed, to her annoyance.

"Ah, my dear, they are fine people; none could be unhappy under their roof. Robert has been like a son to me since Mr. Gray died. She will be a fortunate woman who will call him husband. A better son and brother never was born," she said warmly.

"He has a champion in you, anyway," Hilda said, hoping to draw her on.

"Ah! he is the most loyal-hearted man I know this day, and he will be as great as he is loyal one day. A man with his heart and head can be nothing else."

Hilda could have listened to her all day, but Gwen came dancing down to them. "Now you see, you dear old skinflint, I'm here before you," and she threw bits of bread to the little yellow fluffy creatures floating about the water.

It was a delightful morning to them all, and Hilda especially was sorry to part with her kind hostess.

"You must bring her over to see me again, Robert," she said, as they were leaving.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gray, I will love to come," Hilda answered.

"And I will like to bring her," returned Robert, and they rode back in the fresh spring day in the wake of the others.

A new awakening had come to Hilda during this brief visit. She knew now why she was so happy. She knew that love, strong and surging, had found a place in her heart; and whatever her father or brother or set thought, she knew that her future happiness lay in Robert Rothsay's keeping. She blushed deeply as she felt his eyes on her face when he put up his arms to lift her down.

"Did you enjoy your visit so much?" he asked her.

"Very much indeed, thank you," she answered quietly.

"I must get a chance soon to ask you why I am an enigma?"

"You had all the morning for that."

"Ah! but I had to be riding master to a certain young lady."

Hilda laughed gaily. "I am afraid you are laying a heavy penalty on your shoulders."

"How?"

"A riding master generally leaves his pupil an accomplished rider."

"Well?" he questioned again.

"Do you undertake that responsibility?" she asked playfully.

“ With the greatest interest and pleasure imaginable. I am only afraid that my pupil will learn too rapidly and deprive me of a great deal,” he answered as they joined the others.

“ Mick, old fellow, you will stay to tea with us ? ”

“ No, Bob, not to-day. I must be off, but I’ll drop in again soon,” and he departed after receiving the honest thanks of all, even the Justice wrung his hand with hearty goodwill.

Mick’s mind was more at ease concerning Isabel, for both going and coming she had kept close to the buggy, so he concluded “ that she didn’t care a rap for the bloke or twenty others like him, although he wasn’t a bad sort of a cuss at all.”

CHAPTER VII

THE PLIGHT OF THE PUGHS

IT was decided on the following morning, which was Saturday, to take the visitors around some of the farms. Being Saturday there was much to do about the house and farm, so that only Lucy and Isabel could be spared. But Robert promised to take Hilda for a ride on her return, in order to coach her further in preparation for the long ride to Walhalla. The coaching was merely an excuse, for Robert would have taken her had she been the best horsewoman in Australia, a fact which Hilda read in his eyes, as he helped her into the buggy, and which buoyed her up immensely.

The first farm to visit was owned by a family named Pugh, who had given Mrs. Rothsay a cordial invitation the previous Sunday, to bring her visitors to see them all.

As Gwen explained before they set out, there was Pa Pugh, Ma Pugh, Miss Jane Annie Pugh, Miss Herilda Pugh, Miss Maria Ethel Pugh, and Miss Sarah Ann Pugh and half a dozen little Pughs, besides Mr. Claude, Thomas and Archibald Pugh.

The Pughs had taken up a selection when Jane Annie was a baby, and had toiled and cleared the ground and struggled bravely and reared a large family honestly and well. They were respectable, hard-working people and a credit to the neighbourhood.

There had been great consultation among the elder girls when they heard that a young gentleman comprised one of the Rothsay's guests, and they had been unanimous in urging their mother to be expedient with her invitation, and since they had Mrs. Rothsay's word that they would bring the visitors up, they were in a fever of expectation.

Each one of the girls secretly made up her mind "to catch him." They all decided that it would be on a Sunday after church that the Rothsays would bring "him." As for their coming on a Saturday was not to be dreamt of. On the strength of their own reflections they had left the domestic washing until late in the week, had taken down curtains, etc., so that all would be spick and span when "he" should arrive. Indeed, they had been ironing so late and still later disturbing Pa Pugh's slumbers by their giggles, as they discussed the cookies and certain little frivolities which they meant to prepare for Sunday, that as a consequence they were tired and sleepy when the four-thirty alarm went in the morning, to summons them to the milking yard, where the family between them milked fifty cows before they thought of partaking

of a morsel of breakfast. So that Pa Pugh was not in the best of humours, being awakened after his disturbed sleep, and declared that "he wouldn't move a peg until the darned clock struck five, factory or no factory."

It was an acknowledged fact that the Pugh lads were the first to deliver their milk at the factory every morning, and consequently first home, besides being the largest suppliers in the district.

Eventually the entire Pugh family emerged to the yard, sleepy and out of humour. The air smelt rain and the flies buzzed around the cows and made them kick viciously, and to make matters worse one cow kicked over a kerosene tin full of the richest milk in the yard, which made Pa Pugh doubly mad, considering that he had the highest test for quality at the factory.

As soon as Ma Pugh had dispensed breakfast to her family, two of the boys took away the milk to the factory, and Pa Pugh took himself off to skin and clean two hares, which Thomas had shot as he brought the cows home in the morning, and of all places that he chose to clean them, this day of all others, was the back kitchen door, "as if the place wasn't pigsty enough already," Herilda grumbled.

Worse and worse, Ma Pugh, who could not bear to hear the girls say a word about their father, without, as they told each other, "runnin' contrary," took herself off to the front veranda and began rooting over all the tins and pots of flowers

and ferns, emptying out the weakly ones on the veranda and replacing them in fresh black soil.

"Of all the pigsties!" wailed Jane Annie; but there was no time to waste discussing the unworthy subject of either pigsty, so two of the girls set to work to put up the curtains, which were starched stiff and dyed a vivid yellow.

Pa Pugh pegged out the hare skins against the washhouse door, and when the boys returned, took them all off to a bush paddock, where they were "burning off."

Herilda and some of the younger children were engaged cleaning the returned milk cans outside the back door of the kitchen, and Sarah Ann, the poetic soul of the family, was cutting up onions and the hindquarters of the hares, preparatory to "makin' an 'ash," when, mercy! a buggy containing "him" dashed up to the back door.

A bend in the road and thick bush hid the visitors until they were almost at the back door, and the dogs were away with the men.

The first glimpse that Hugh got of a Miss Pugh was short lived. A startled look from a pair of blue eyes set in a red freckled face, straw-coloured hair twisted up in paper curls, a short torn bodice ending under the arms, a short skirt and bare feet, and the sight was gone for ever, but he had taken it all in.

"Please me mofer sez I'm to 'old ther 'orse and yez to go straight in."

"Thanks, Jackie, hold them tightly," said Isabel.

At the back door two cats were fighting over the refuse of the hares.

Lucy paused at the kitchen door, and when she saw the mess it was in she took her friends round to the front door. They were just in time to see a pair of bare feet being dragged through one of the windows. The fuss, confusion and banging of doors was conflicting ; then there was silence. The Rothsay girls began to suspect that they had caught the Pughs in a muddle, to say the least, so entertained their guests with the pot plants until a shuffle announced Ma Pugh, a large fat lady, with her hair on end and buttoning her Sunday dress over her old working clothes and about a foot of a "yardy" petticoat dragging beneath.

"Oh dear me! just fancy! but it's you, Miss Rothsay," and poor ma gave a big hand to each, but her confusion was great.

Lucy introduced them.

"Oh dear gracious! we didn't think you'd come to-day; to-morrow the girls were expectin' you."

"I am sorry," said Lucy, "but we had no other time. We are going to Walhalla Monday, so should not have been able to come to-morrow."

A bright idea struck Isabel. "Will you be in this afternoon? If so, we could call on our way back; we want to see Mrs. Mills before dinner," she said to Mrs. Pugh.

Ma's big face glowed. "Oh dear gracious, that's the very thing now; will you now?"

"Yes, that will be a good idea, Isabel," said Lucy, and without more ado they all made towards the buggy. Hugh had a lingering side glance at Ma Pugh's face as he went, and when he caught up with Isabel, who was ahead with his father, his thoughts were condensed into the one word of disgust—Pugh!"

But it was enough to nearly convulse the whole party. Indeed, the Justice pulled out his handkerchief so hurriedly that when he arrived at the buggy he discovered that he had dropped his pince-nez case. Hugh went back to get it.

In the meanwhile, Ma Pugh had backed into the front passage and made a dart to the girls' room, from which they could see their visitors passing to the buggy, but not the buggy itself; consequently, they did not see Hugh return.

"Oh heavens, ma!! did he see you in such a rig as that?" Herilda whispered loudly.

"Oh, dear gracious me, do I look a fright? I was never so flustered in me born days, and them men real toffs too," and poor ma wiped the perspiration from her forehead with her sleeve.

"That's you all over," sneered Jane Annie. "Us girls never did have a chance to marry well but you upset our apple cart for us."

"My gosh! if you don't use finer manners it's

an apple-cart man who you'll marry, or the likes," was her mother's scathing remark.

"Oh, girls, I wonder if he did see us? Herilda; are you sure he didn't see you scoot in when he come?" wailed Sarah Ann.

"Of course he didn't see me. I was in like a shot; none of them seen me, thank me stars," said Herilda loftily; "but I mean him to see me and admire me too," she added, as she left the room with all the others in her wake.

Now Hugh was behind a laurel bush and heard every word they said. He could see the case lying on the path which ran past the window and was just a few steps off it when he heard the ladies' remarks; but the moment Herilda flounced out of the room and the others turned their heads, Hugh snapped the case and ran.

"Lucy, Lucy, drive like the very mischief!" he gasped, forgetting to add a prefix. Lucy laughed good-naturedly.

"Why, what has got you now?"

"They haven't got me yet, but Cæsar's ghost! what chance would a fellow have if they all set their caps at once?" and Hugh laughed so heartily that he frightened the horses until Lucy could hardly hold them.

They found Mr. and Mrs. Mills at home and they enjoyed their visit so well that they would gladly have spent the day there, that is excluding Hilda, who was feverish to get back for her ride. Hugh,

too, was curious to see how the Miss Pughs would deport themselves.

As they neared the Pugh's homestead again, half a dozen dogs of different sizes and breeds rushed out at them, Pa Pugh in their wake.

"Hi! you lazy scoundrel—off!! Heut you! you good-for-nothin's. They won't bite when I'm here, mam," as Hilda got down.

"How do, Lucy? How do, Izy? Fine day this, constable," and he extended an honest, hard-worked hand to the Justice.

Isabel came to his rescue. "This is Justice Harwood, Mr. Pugh."

"I fail to see the difference, my girl," answered pa, drawing himself up. "Isn't he a Justice of the Peace? Well! and isn't a J.P. a constable? The young people always know more than us old fogies, don't they?" he asked, addressing himself to Justice Harwood.

"I don't know but what you are quite right," he answered roguishly.

"'Course I am; why, not ten minutes ago there was Sarah Ann dictatin' to the missis what she was to say and what she was to wear, and I pretty soon told her that many's the time you've arrested a young woman for less offence than that."

Two hours later Lucy drew up her team in fine style at her door. Bob helped the ladies down. Hugh sat still with his hand over his heart. "Bob, old chap, have you ever caught it yet?" he asked.

"Caught what?"

"The Miss Pughs' love."

Bob laughed. "No, although I confess it was not their fault; have you got it bad?"

"Bad! Oh criky! here, constable, help Bob with these horses, I'm feeling bad."

"You young dog," said his father playfully, nevertheless he helped—Bob, and Hugh tottered inside.

"Whatever is the matter, Hugh?" Gwen asked as he came into the dining-room.

"Matter! Oh, Gwen, the Miss Pughs are after me," and he pretended so woebegone a look that Gwen's kind heart was touched.

"Hugh, you are not well? It was wrong of us to let you lift those bags yesterday."

Hugh could hold himself in no longer. With one loud roar he rolled off the chair on to the floor and roared laughing.

Gwen thought he had a touch of the sun, and with an anxious face sought his father, who hurried in to find Hugh rolling on the carpet in side-aching laughter.

"You young scoundrel, what do you mean by frightening little Gwen like this?" and his father gave him a fond kick.

Gwen's indignation was great.

"Hugh Harwood, get up this instant and tell me what is amusing you like this."

"Oh, Gwen, forgive me, but I must laugh or I

will explode," and off he went again, and presently he had them all joining him with his account and description of his first glimpse of the Miss Pughs.

"And what do you think was Miss Herilda's first comment to me?" he asked of Gwen. "She said, 'Oh, Mr. Harwood, how very unfortunate that us girls was not home when you called this mornin'! Ma said that you caught her in the middle of fixin' the pot plants.'

"Oh Jove! I could hardly contain my gravity," said Hugh. "And to make it worse, a dirty-looking youngster was gaping through the window grinning and listening, and he called out, 'Oh, you fib, you were hidin' behind the bedroom door.'

"William Henry, run away at once and don't learn to tell naughty stories.'

"I ain't tellin' stories, you are; you was home and you had no boots and socks on.'

"Whereupon Miss Herilda went out with a red face, dragging the youngster after her, and then ensued a fight, which, however, ma terminated by coming out and giving William Henry a sound spanking, and his sister came back to my side with a most profound sigh. 'Oh dear me, ain't children aggravatin'? that child's imagination just runs away with him.'

"After awhile I was conducted out to see the garden—but my only recollection of it was the three Miss Pughs. I had to take a flower from each, give a flower to each, to tell my favourite jam, my

favourite meal, what colour suited them best in my opinion. Each one in turn has promised to teach me to shoot and ride. I have to dance with them all at somebody or other's party, was asked my age and if I ever had a girl before.

"By this time ma was calling out, 'Sarah Ann! Sarah Ann! come 'ere and get a cup o' tea.'

" 'It's ever thus, Mr. Harwood,' Sarah Ann said, giving my arm a squeeze. 'However eatin' ever come into fashion, I don't know. Just as soon as ever I get a choice spirit and begin to enjoy myself, ma makes me transcend into the vulgar things of this life.'

"Oh! I can't tell you how funny they were," laughed Hugh. "They were all in starch and lace—window curtains, I think—and they all helped me into the buggy."

CHAPTER VIII

HUGH'S PROMISE

ROBERT and Hilda did not return from their ride until the twilight had deepened. Hilda made no attempt to join the others after she had changed her habit. Her happiness was too great to parade before the eyes of others just yet.

She changed into a soft clinging pale blue gown, which Bob had admired the evening before, and walked to the far end of the veranda, amongst the vines, and stood looking into the night. Robert left the others and joined her. How beautiful she looked to him, standing there in her clinging robe, the soft rays from the young moon making her face look pure and womanly and showing the love-light in her eyes. However could he have taken her for a heartless society girl and even hinted to himself at a possibility of her being red-headed. How absurd of him! where were all their eyes? he wondered.

Hilda turned and he held out his arms. "My Hilda, my darling," he said fervently. He held her face between his palms and looked deeply into her eyes. "Hilda, answer me from your own true

heart. Was I wrong in speaking to you this afternoon? I know I should have waited until you knew me better; but oh, Hilda, I couldn't help myself. I've only known what it is to love these few days. If I've taken an unfair advantage of you, if anything should change your opinion of me, do not be afraid to tell me. I would rather bear that than make the mistake of marrying somebody that—that——"

"Robert, listen. I love you from my heart with the only love I have to offer, and if anything prevents my marrying you I will never marry at all. I have refused other chances. Do not think, dear, that I will shirk farm life. I hope I am a different woman to what I was when I came here. I feel different through and through."

"Darling! not different in my eyes; we just didn't know you so well."

"No, Robert, I feel and know that I am different. I know now how rude and selfish I must have seemed to your sisters; had they not been gentlewomen, I must have been snubbed over and over again." Hilda turned her face away for a moment and a sob rose from her heart. "Robert," she whispered, "what will they all think of me when they idolize you so? They will want somebody very perfect for you, dear."

"My dearest, put such thoughts away from you. They love you already, and will love you more when you are both daughter and sister."

"But, dear, you haven't watched as many mothers and sisters as I have. They are absurdly jealous, as a rule."

"Hilda, you mustn't forestall trouble. Even if such a contingency arose as you suggest, would that make me love you less?" he asked.

"Oh, Robert, how can you?"

"Well, dear, remember this: if such a thing did occur, it would not make any difference to your happiness," and Robert placed his hand on her shoulder.

"No, darling, it wouldn't unless they made you see it too."

"Nobody will accomplish that. If my mother or sisters cared so little about me as to even suggest a word against the woman I loved, and whose love was my happiness, I should lose a certain amount of respect for them that they should never regain, besides making me love my wife ten times more, if that would be possible," he added playfully.

"Robert, I will trust you to protect me against everything; even if they cannot love me, they are far too gentle to show it. I was foolish to suggest such a thing; but you know it's all so new to me yet," she said shyly.

"No, darling, you were right. From this moment bring any and every worry and annoyance to me and I solemnly promise to watch over you and be on the look-out for even a chance glance against you," he ended, giving her a fond kiss.

"Oh dear me! then you won't have another moment's peace, for you know I'm a horrid creature and very few like me."

"So it seems," answered Robert, putting his arm around her waist.

Gwen was calling them, and Hilda whispered to Robert not to tell the rest just yet. They had agreed during their ride not to announce their engagement for another week. Hilda could not share the beautiful secret yet awhile.

"Whatever are you two so interested in away this end of the veranda? I'd like to know. I declare, too! Bob Rothsay! if you haven't got your arm around Hilda's waist," and Gwen impulsively kissed Hilda and called her "a darling thing." "But it's really too bad all the same," she declared. "There's our respected parents talking over their English days, Lucy away in a corner making something for her glory box, Hugh and Isabel are walking in the garden this hour past, and I'm poking the fire and trying to see what's in store for me; but I mean to hunt you all in now."

"Poor Gwen, we will come at once," answered Hilda.

"All right, mind you do, or I'll tell them I caught you spooning," and Gwen flitted away down the garden, coughing loudly, "making loud ahems," pretending that she did not want to take Hugh and Isabel unawares. After Gwen had gathered

them all in, she sat down solemnly and addressed them.

“My children, as you must be aware, this is Saturday night, and as the Sabbath falls to-morrow, it behoves us all to retire early, so that our minds will be rested and able to grasp the Divine truths of the service. As for this barbarous and vulgar fashion of taking supper on a Saturday evening, I do not at all approve——”

Here Robert and Hugh made a dash at her and lifted her, chair and all, and set her down in front of the sideboard, on which was placed a plate of delicious almond toffee, not yet cold.

“Now then, Hugh, here goes for a feast; as this ancient one doesn’t approve of eating to-night——”

“Bob, don’t you touch it; it isn’t cold yet. Put it down,” cried Gwen in alarm.

“If you promise us a good supper and some of that toffee besides, we will,” said Hugh.

“All right, Hugh, we will cry quits,” said Gwen, snatching the toffee and making off with it, with all the young folks at her heels. After a merry chase she let them sample it only, as it was for the Walhalla trip. While the coffee brewed Lucy led them into the drawing-room for a song. They sang glees and laughed in chorus until the very walls of the old room seemed to catch the contagion and echo the mirth and music. Even Isabel forgot her usual reticence before strangers and struck off

into a wild gallop, and presently began singing the merriest, maddest air that one could imagine. She looked so happy and bright that Justice Harwood was struck with her strong resemblance to Gwen.

Even Mrs. Rothsay and Justice Harwood found themselves stamping their feet and keeping time like the frequenters of the gods in His Majesty's. When Isabel had finished her song she struck off into the Indies waltz. Robert hastily offered his arm to Hilda, poor Hugh took a long back view of Isabel and then led Lucy out. As they began to dance, Justice Harwood actually found himself waltzing about the room, securing chairs and footstools to give greater facility for the dancers.

Gwen looked dolefully on for a second or two and then ran out and got the kitchen broom and danced gleefully into the room and set them all laughing. Lucy caught Hugh's longing look at Isabel. "You must stop at once, Hugh; this carpet dancing is heavy. Isabel, give Hugh a dance and I will play."

"Thanks, Lucy dear," and she and Hugh were beginning almost before Lucy began to play.

Many and many a time through the years to come, Hugh could recall the whole scene again. The old room with its bright fire, which threw out the light on one particular spot of the faded carpet as they swung around, the scent of the freshly-picked wattle blossom, the pleasant faces of his father and Mrs. Rothsay as they watched them

dance, and little mischievous Gwen with her broom and antics. It was a never-to-be-forgotten dance, and to Lucy it seemed a never-to-end one, but she good-naturedly played on until an interruption came in the form of Mick Maccaffey, who thrust his head unceremoniously through the door.

"Hollo, there! how is she goin'?" he called out at the top of his voice.

Hilda got a fright and so ended the grandest, greatest dance of those four people's existence.

Mick stood still by the door, as though trying to make up his mind. He did not relish the thought of Isabel dancing with Hugh.

"Look here, Isabel! will you have a polka with me?" he asked at last.

Isabel flushed. "Yes, a short one, Mick; I feel tired."

Instantly Hugh was at her side. "Miss Isabel, I am sorry; forgive me, I was carried away. I forgot," he said humbly.

She flushed deeper still. "Oh no, I'm not very tired at all, only—— Mick, come on," she ended lamely.

How could she tell Hugh that there was a world of difference between him and Mick for a partner. As Gwen once remarked after a dance with him, "Oh dear me, it makes my face tired to dance with Mick."

He seemed to realize that Hugh was master of the situation and scowled accordingly; but no

sooner had he placed his arm on her waist, than his whole countenance changed. No man could look prouder or happier than he as he grasped her hand and held it straight out, to be dumped up and down stiffly at each third step of the dance, and each time it was dumped up his foot came down flat and heavy.

Mick would not deign to dance to piano music when an accordion, mouth organ, or concertina could be got to play ; if not, then he would whistle " Little Brown Jug," like he did on this occasion.

When Hugh had watched several turns of Mick's performance, he began to grow impatient for Isabel's sake and tried to draw his attention, but to use Mick's own vernacular, " he knew when he had a good thing on."

" Hey ! Mr. Maccaffey, Miss Rothsay's tired."

Mr. Maccaffey's only reply was to quicken his pace and to whistle louder, faster, and more out of tune than ever.

Hugh watched them for a few more turns, then stood up as Mick swung around his side again.

" Mr. Maccaffey, I insist that you release Miss Isabel ; don't you see how exhausted she is ? " For she did look very tired and pale.

Mick frowned and, turning swiftly, faced Hugh.

" What in thunder have you to do with it or her ? " he asked savagely.

Isabel saved the situation. " Mick, Mick, whatever has gone wrong with you ? I'm very tired and

I can't dance another step ; besides, Justice Harwood is waiting to consult you about something."

" Yes, indeed, Mr. Maccaffey, I am very interested in those shorthorn cattle of yours, and would like to know something of your treatment of them," said the Justice, coming bravely to her rescue.

Thus pacified, Mick gave a lengthy recital of his trials with the custom and railway authorities in getting his imported stock out and the trouble he had to get them to their present condition.

He joined in the fun at the supper table and was apparently quite friendly with Hugh. As he was preparing to leave later on, he nudged Hugh. " I say, blokie, you may as well come down to the gate with me."

" Right. Don't mind if I do," he answered, and was about to invite Bob to come too when Mick interposed.

" No ! what I have to say is meant for you."

" Oh, right you are, old man," laughed Hugh good-naturedly, as he strolled out and lit a cigar.

Presently Mick joined him, leading his horse. He lit his short black pipe and then walked on without a word until they got to the road gate, then Mick turned about and looked at Hugh. " Now then—but, by golly ! I mean to see what you're up to," he said, still keeping the pipe in his mouth.

" See what I'm up to ? Don't really know what you mean," Hugh answered with a broad smile.

" Oh, don't yer ? you don't understand that you've

come up here a ragin' howlin' toff and think you can catch the finest girl in the country as easy as I can me horse. Yes, you and others like you makes no shakes of gettin' a girl's love and then throwin' them over when you go back to town and think no more of them, and the poor silly things fret themselves to death and then have to fall back on us fellows; but us fellows won't be caught with chaff and play second fiddle to you blokes—don't yer believe it. Now look'yr here," continued Mick, taking a step nearer Hugh and a fresh grip of his pipe. "You needn't think because Bob happens to be rats on that sister of yours (although she isn't a bad filly for a chestnut), and forgets about his sister's danger, that she hasn't anybody to battle for her. She's gōt me—and by golly! Heaven help the man who gives her a second's trouble. . . . Do you hear me?" cried Mick loudly, as he placed an iron grip on Hugh's shoulder.

"Whatever are you driving at?" Hugh asked, with a hot flush of temper.

"I'm drivin' at Isabel's honour, and mean to keep a good grip of the reins too," Mick answered sneeringly.

"Then I wish you would drive some sense into that thick head of yours at the same time," said Hugh, throwing away the stump of his cigar. "In the first place, may I ask what relation you are to Miss Isabel?"

"I'm no relation, but I hope to be before long," said Mick sullenly.

"Oh! that's the sting, is it? Look here," continued Hugh, cooling down, "let us understand one another. Are you engaged to Miss Isabel?"

"No."

"Have you ever asked her to be your wife?" questioned Hugh, although he knew very well from Bob.

"By the holy jimnie what's that to do with you? By golly! for born cheek you fellows take the cake," and Mick said a word I would rather not write here.

"Here, that will do. If you want me to listen to you, talk rationally if you please. You are not engaged to Miss Isabel and yet you would condemn her, either to wait your leisure or else marry one of your friends; is that it?"

"No," slowly answered Mick.

"Well, if it is not that, and you do not mean to ask her yourself, why do you object to others trying their luck?"

"But I do mean to ask her again, and—and——" said Mick, beginning to lose control of himself.

"Again! then you have asked her before?"

"Yes," admitted Mick, "a few times; but I think she'll have me yet if some fool doesn't interfere."

"Aho! so that's it! You are a pretty fellow; you have already asked a young lady a few times

to be your wife, and she has refused you every time—a lady, too, who knows her own mind—and now you object to me paying her attention. Do you expect her to keep single out of respect to you ? ” asked Hugh severely.

Poor Mick was fast losing ground. He began digging his heel into the ground. “ No, I don’t,” he answered doggedly, “ but she was my friend before she seen you, and I want to have another try. You come here and have a good time and you’ll go away and forget all about her, but my chance will be gone.”

“ How do you know I will ? ” asked Hugh. “ Do you think you are the only honourable man ? ”

“ And won’t you ? Do you really like her ? ” asked Mick hoarsely.

“ Yes, Mick, I really like her,” he answered gently, touched by Mick’s anxious pleading face. “ I can go further than that : I love her.”

Mick let his black pipe fall to the ground unheeded and gripped the fence hard.

Hugh was sorry for him and laid his hand on his shoulder. “ You were right to speak to me, old fellow. I can understand your anxiety for her safety ; but, Mick, a dishonourable thought has never entered my mind toward any woman—the woman I love, least of all—and the woman you love too,” he added kindly.

Mick groaned.

“ Then I suppose it’s all up with me ? If you

really love her, I may as well give up," he said brokenly.

"Wait, man! although I love her she mightn't have given me a thought yet. I want to win no man's bride. Mick, I promise you faithfully not to mention a word of love to her until you have had your chance. I will give you a week, and then am I free to speak?" asked Hugh.

Mick's face brightened. "By golly, but you are a good sort of a cuss after all, and I thank you from me heart, old man"; and Mick wrung his hand hard and long, and then mounted and rode off without a word.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHURCH OF CRAIGIEOWEN

THE Sabbath morning ; but not the city Sabbath, great and restful as it is after the stress and turmoil of the week, but a country Sabbath, grand and sublime even to the roughest and meanest son of toil.

Isabel felt this as she went to hunt in the cows to be milked. Robert had set the alarm for himself, but when she peeped in and found him sleeping so soundly, she reset the alarm much later and set off after the cows herself.

She found them lying down in the topmost paddocks, under the shelter of the hills. They looked up at her so confidently as they chewed away at their cuds that she felt it hard to disturb them, so sat down on an old stump for a few minutes watching the hills, which begun where she sat and stretched away against the skyline, growing more and more purple as her eyes wandered over them.

Up a gully, not two hundred yards from her, the lyre birds were calling each other, and the clear note of the bell birds rang out with a silvery clang, as they flitted in and out the tall tree ferns.

Then she looked down over the fields to her own home nestling in amongst the orchard and greeneries. Her home, which contained all that was dear to her in the world. Something in the very look of the silent old logs and trees and stumps ; even the very grass about her feet seemed to be whispering to her ; she understood, and her heart sent up a prayer of thankfulness for all her good gifts. Nature always appealed strongly to Isabel ; even when a wee child she would come in, after a walk in the hills, with her arms filled with wild flowers and ferns or faded leaves and her face radiant with spiritual sympathy.

She felt almost too happy to breathe as she thought of Hugh. What a grand man he seemed to her and how like Robert. She felt quite sure he understood her and cared, and oh, how thankful she ought to be !

The three visitors were with Mrs. Rothsay, enjoying the morning view, when Robert called to his mother. " Mother, will our guests join in our hymn ? "

Mrs. Rothsay turned to them. " It has been our custom for years to sing a hymn before breakfast on the Sabbath morning ; will you join us ? "

" Most certainly—with great pleasure," answered Justice Harwood for all.

It was a beautiful idea of Isabel's, when her father was ill, to play and sing a hymn every Sabbath morning as a thanksgiving that they were

still permitted to keep him with them, and since he died, they had not departed from the custom. It was Isabel's privilege always to choose and play the hymn, and no matter what it was no opposition was ever offered.

This morning she had chosen "Oh, how beautiful upon the mountains." To the Harwood's surprise Robert passed them the books already opened, and Isabel led the hymn before she or Robert had even wished them a good morning. They had been watching the sun top the hills from the garden and exclaiming on the majesty of the scenery, and now this beautiful hymn, expressing precisely their feelings, was like a revelation to them.

As Hugh took Isabel's hand to wish her good-morning, his mind flashed back to poor Mick's despair and a great pity filled his heart.

One would naturally suppose that after such a solemn opening it would be incumbent upon them all to maintain a certain gravity throughout the day, but they would be mistaken. The Rothsays were far too wholesome-minded for that.

Hilda had been used to going to church if the inclination took her, and filling up the day with a good novel or playing through the latest opera. She had a very guilty feeling now when she thought back at her carelessness. Here, where they thanked the Creator for every meal, what might she not expect on the Sabbath? So she took occasion to probe Gwen, when she helped her with the rooms

after breakfast. "Gwen, what do you do on a Sunday?"

"I don't know, except try and keep from doing wrong; for my part I sometimes put in a very hard time of it at church when old Mr. Knox preaches; he nearly makes me die laughing, and some of them do laugh," answered Gwen.

"But Gwen, you say you want to laugh; isn't that as bad?"

"Yes, it's as bad in our hearts, but you see it does not set a bad example, just like mother says about dancing and singing songs on Sunday; there is really no harm in innocent amusement in itself, but it's the bad example to the intemperate, not knowing where to draw the line; so it's better to refrain from all the wrong we can," said Gwen sagely.

Only the most necessary of the work was performed, and after a cold dinner they all prepared to walk to the Craigieowen Mechanics' Institute, a small barn-like building, where Church service was conducted every Sabbath at three o'clock, by the different denominations alternately. Wet and dry found the Rothsays at church. It mattered not who preached.

They followed a little beaten path through the farm paddocks, which led to the Church and the hills beyond. There had been a slight shower in the forenoon, just enough to damp the grass and bushes and enhance the pleasure of the walk to

the town folk, for the wild flowers and grasses and bushes smell doubly sweet after a shower.

Just after they left the farm paddocks and at the foot of the ranges stood the Church, with bush almost to the door and a public road running past it. Half a dozen spring carts and buggies with horses attached stood alongside the fence, and a few more pretentious-looking vehicles were under the shade of some big eucalyptus trees, with the horses tethered to the wheels. A long string of saddle-horses, belonging to the younger members of both sexes, were tied to the fence.

About a dozen young fellows were perched on the post-and-rail fence; little knots of men and women, young and old, were gathered about outside waiting until the Sunday school would come out.

As the Rothsay party came up there was something of a panic. The youths on the fence gasped and nudged each other and whistled in an undertone to make their girl friends look quickly and not miss the sight. The young men on terra firma dug holes in the ground with their heels and wriggled until the whole party had passed. The ladies, scattered about, tittered and eyed Hilda's garments, when they were not admiring her brother.

The Rothsays passed slowly up in front of the Church, with pleasant nods and smiles to every group they passed. The Justice and Hugh had got some mud on their boots, and in going around

the corner of the building to try and scrape it off, they came face to face with the three Miss Pughs, who had come early in order to "fix" themselves up before "he" should come.

The fixing up consisted of seeing to their back hair, plastering their hair down on their foreheads with a net, screwing their belts straight, and seeing that their safety pins didn't show, also getting the right hitch in holding up their skirts, which were made with a slight train. Nor was that all. Herilda was always noticed to carry a macramé bag to church, for some months past, containing a round brown paper parcel. It was supposed to carry the family bottle of smelling salts, but what it really did contain was a baby's puff box.

A lady who had visited them, months before, and brought her baby for the day, had also brought the puff box, along with other baby needfuls. During the day she had slightly powdered the baby's face to ward off sunburn. The girls were surprised at the difference it made in the infant skin, so that when the mother and baby left and forgot to take the powder, there was great rejoicing.

Even ma and pa didn't know of it, and above all, the younger members were ignorant of it. It was used judiciously though. Wet days it was not brought along, neither on the days when old Mr. Knox preached, for then only a few old people turned up as a rule; but on fine days and when anything was "on," along it came.

They did not powder themselves at home for fear the effect would wear off before church, but they generally managed to get behind some bushes just before they got to the church and one at a time would be posted sentinel. To-day in their hurry to be early the puff box had only got a secondary place. Two of them had been finished off, and looked "sweetly delicate," Herilda had said, when asked her opinion, and she herself was just being done; indeed, Sarah Ann had put a few big daubs on her face, when they were all startled by Hugh and his father's appearance. Sarah Ann hastily pushed the puff box into the bag, during which process the lid rolled off.

They all blushed vividly, and Herilda forgot her face in her confusion at seeing "him." They "oh, fancied" and tittered to such an extent that Hugh had hard work to maintain his gravity, and was glad when the others joined them.

"Whatever is up with your face, Hilda?" asked Gwen laughingly.

"She's been foolin' with the middles of them trumpet lilies, that ma keeps on the veranda, I suppose," said Jane Annie, without a moment's hesitation. But she hastily rubbed her sister's face with her pocket handkerchief.

Presently they all filed into church, but it was a long time before anything like order was restored. Moving chairs, tittering, changing seats, two youths at the back sparring, the lady organist trying over

some hymns and the choir talking in a lively strain ; such a din and babble, and, to make matters worse, several dogs were running about the room—and still no preacher.

After awhile the noisy ones settled down to watch the new-comers, and the organist and choir sat still watching the door, expecting to see the minister appear every minute.

After waiting as quietly as could be expected for fifteen minutes, the noise and tittering began again. Then Robert left his seat and passed up to the pulpit.

“ I am afraid that something has gone wrong with our minister, but he may turn up any minute. In the meanwhile, I think it would be a good idea for us to sing a hymn, if our organist will choose one,” he said pleasantly.

After a good deal of whispering amongst the choir, a hymn was decided on. Robert gave it out and they sang it heartily to the end, and still no preacher.

Poor Robert went very red. “ I am afraid, my friends, that a big disappointment is in store for us. I hope nothing has gone wrong with the minister. . . . Will one of you elderly gentlemen take the service ? ” he asked, looking direct at two or three old farmers. They shook their heads. “ Will anybody else take it ? ” But there was no response, with the exception of more whispering.

"I will read a chapter and say a short prayer," said Robert.

Robert read the twelfth chapter of St. Luke. Very earnestly and clearly he read the chapter through. There was a deep silence while he read. There may have been something in the fact that they were making the most of the only part of the sermon they were to hear.

Robert closed the book reverently when he had finished reading.

"Let us give thanks for being able to come out to-day," he said simply, and bowed his head.

To Robert Rothsay there was no intermediate earthly being to pray through. He prayed from his heart direct to his Heavenly Father. There were no scholastic frills for the sake of his audience, but grateful thanks was spoken for being given the privilege to attend His house of worship. He prayed for the rich and poor, the sick and the worried and anxious, for bright days for the aged, and happy free days for the young.

It was all very simple and earnest, but the little congregation looked as if a great draught had been at work, giving them "fresh colds." It showed a great harmony amongst the little community that not one of the congregation left the church without a nod, handshake or exchange of words. There were a few titters as Miss Herilda Pugh minced out of church with her new dark skirt all white where the powder had spilt through the meshes of her

bag. She was determined to be first out, and secure what she could of the precious beautifier.

Hilda was very quiet as she walked out with Robert. She felt almost awed in his presence. As he had looked up after his prayer, his face was lit up with such earnestness that for a moment she had been startled; the next, she had gripped the keynote of his happiness.

Scores of men whom she knew were far more brilliantly educated, but Robert Rothsay (her Robert now) had a personality that a king might envy.

"I must try and find this happiness, so that I will be a true companion to him," she thought.

"What a dear old fellow Bob is," said Hugh affectionately, as he walked home with Mrs. Rothsay and Isabel. "I'd give a great deal to be able to do what he did to-day," he continued in a sadder tone.

"What would prevent you?" Isabel asked quietly.

"Why? oh, I—oh, dash it! you know I couldn't; I'm not built that way," answered Hugh confusedly.

Isabel and her mother could not help laughing at him. "But, my dear boy," said Mrs. Rothsay, "what Robert did was very simple—just to read a chapter and say a short prayer. You could do that under similar circumstances."

Hugh coloured to the roots of his hair and looked

like a guilty school-boy caught red-handed thieving apples.

"But I could not even do that, I am ashamed to say. I could read the chapter all right, but I would not know which one to read. I might go reading one of those that begin and end with the nation's pedigree; and as for praying," he stammered, "I have never prayed in my life."

"My poor Hugh!" and Mrs. Rothsay took his hand in sorrow, but Isabel's face went white.

"Miss Isabel, don't turn away. It was not wholly wickedness—more carelessness, I think, than anything else. I've been so long used to having our parson pray for me out of his book that I never saw the necessity to pray myself until to-day, when I heard Bob petitioning so earnestly 'for the folk who neglected to pray for themselves,' and I am one of these."

Isabel still looked shocked. "Miss Isabel, remember that I was only a baby or little more when I lost my mother, and our nurse never taught us anything about religion, so I grew to be a man without once coming in contact with anybody who could put some life into my soul."

The loss of his mother stirred Isabel's heart. "Forgive me, Mr. Harwood, there has been a great excuse for you," she said gently.

"Yes, there has been excuse for me, but that day has passed. I thought Bob must have meant it especially for me. My life has gone so smoothly

that I'm afraid I have only given the Creator second place."

"My boy, I am thankful that your heart has been stirred. Try to think of yourself as a grain of sand and the Creator as the mighty ocean, and then you will perceive how very small you are," said Mrs. Rothsay earnestly.

"That's exactly what I do feel, but I couldn't express it," answered Hugh.

"Miss Isabel, you will help me to learn these new things; will you not?" Hugh asked as he said good night.

"I will try," was her answer; but, together with her look, it was enough to satisfy Hugh and give him pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER X

WALHALLA

WHEN Hilda awoke and heard them all bustling about, it seemed to her that they could not have gone to their beds at all, but she hopped out nevertheless and donned her habit. Her father and brother were already out and dressed for the journey. They were all awaiting her for breakfast.

Robert had hired the services of an old Irishman known as Paddy. He was very fond of the Rothsays, and they trusted him to look after the place whenever they happened to be away.

Paddy lived in a little hut far up the creek, and grew potatoes on it's rich banks for a living.

It was still not five o'clock when they had finished breakfast and Paddy had the horses at the door.

Lucy and her mother occupied the front seat of the buggy, and Gwen and the Justice the back. They wanted Gwen to ride with the others, but she was afraid of being *de trop*.

After a great many good-byes to old Paddy and the two dogs, Rags and Scraggy, and a dozen assur-

ances from Paddy that "they were niver to trible about anythink whatsoever, everythink would be roight as rain," they departed in great glee. Even the horses seemed to imbibe some of their freshness and humour, being almost too skittish for Lucy to hold. But they needed all their strength for such a journey, for there was over twenty miles of rough hill-climbing before their goal would be reached.

Those who have never ridden or walked among the hills in the early morning have missed one of the greatest treats which they are likely to know in a lifetime. The sweet spring air, laden with the scent of the wild things, the hills and treetops and bushes and logs catching the first rays of the sun, which, striking the bushes and creepers and wild flowers, damp with dew, sends out a sweeter fragrance still. Then, as the sun gets higher up, it lights all the dark gullies and ferny dells and dispels the shadows as you look, and shows you innumerable beautiful things where density reigned before.

Perhaps, while you look, a pheasant will perch on a low bush and give one of his wondrous calls, and while you are still watching, he is gone, but in a flash and you hear him call from the next gully. The bell bird will fly about the bushes near you, answering, with his sweet bell call, his mate down in the fern-clad gully. A jackass will be laughing heartily from a broken stump,

and from the trees on the hills you will hear the bagpipe notes of the wild magpie. As the sun gets higher up the pheasant and bell bird will not be seen, unless you follow deeper into the gullies, but myriads of parrots with their bright plumage will twitter about the eucalyptus trees, as curious as monkeys to see all that goes on.

The whole party were in an ecstasy of delight. Robert and Hilda rode some distance ahead in case of accident, and Isabel and Hugh about the same distance behind because they wanted to.

After the first four or five miles it was impossible to travel fast, except in occasional spurts. When the top of one hill was reached, it meant going down the other side with brake hard down into a gully and then climbing up the next hill again.

Hilda was enjoying it all exceedingly, tired and all as she was beginning to feel. Yesterday she was willing to share Robert's farm life with him; to-day she would, thankfully and cheerfully, have gone to the bushiest selection, had no other way of a home with him opened to her.

Journeys like these were as the breath of life to Isabel. All these hills she loved. Many a time she had taken the trip with Robert. She was no longer shy with Hugh. Her look of glad trustfulness made it very hard for him. He longed to pour out his heart, but honour to Mick forbade him.

Isabel in her joyousness of heart was radiantly

buoyant. She surprised herself, who was usually so calm as to be considered cold-hearted by strangers—Isabel with the light shining in her eyes and dancing out the silent messages to Hugh. Was every woman's love like hers? she wondered. Did hope such as hers fill every woman's breast? "I could live and die for him," she kept repeating to herself. "What do I care for fame?" She did not wonder at him for not speaking of his love. She knew it would come in his own good time.

She babbled to him of Nature, and showed him so many beautiful things that he had never even dreamt of before that, like Hilda, he looked back to his life at home with something like dread.

It was noon when they all halted in a cool gully. Isabel was alarmed at Hilda's pale tired face. While the men gave the horses a feed and drink from a running brook, she got a rug and cushions from the buggy and made Hilda very comfortable and Gwen fed her with almond toffee.

Soon the men had the big billy boiling, and they all sat down to a hearty meal; even tired Hilda ate with such an appetite that the wild things about must have been envious.

When it was time to mount again Hilda cast longing glances at the buggy, which Robert was quick to notice. "Hilda, my darling," he whispered, "you must go in the buggy for a spell, and I will ask Gwen to take your place."

"Thank you, dear. I am so tired. If Gwen

won't mind?—but I wish you were coming too.”

“I will not be far away, Hilda, now or in the future. The old bond of friendship between our parents is being strangely reunited in the children. Did you notice Isabel's face? Dear Isabel,” he added fondly, thinking of his comrade and sister in one.

Gwen took Hilda's place with the greatest pleasure imaginable. It was Robert who helped Isabel on her horse and gave her hand a tender pat afterwards. “Dear old sister, are you enjoying yourself?” he asked.

She leaned forward and put her hand on his shoulders. “Oh, Bob, so much,” she whispered, but there were happy tears in her eyes.

Half an hour later Robert and Gwen rode back to tell Lucy to push on, as the coach was waiting for them. They rode ahead again, as the road was too narrow to admit of their riding alongside.

It needed no explanation to show the Harwoods the reason why the coach was waiting. They had only to glance to their right to see that they were completely hemmed in by a high straight cutting and a higher hill still, and to look down from their left to know that, were the horses to shy or swerve a few feet, it meant almost certain death. Down, down over rocks and scrub and growth which ended in a deep, rocky gorge, with a rocky and bushy hill on the other side.

Here and there, as you went along, you could

catch the silver gleam of water amongst the tree-ferns and rocks, right at the bottom of the gorge.

At intervals, along the cutting, there were big recesses scooped out of the side, in which one vehicle could let another pass. In one of these they now found the Walhalla coach waiting on them. A merry, lively lot of passengers were aboard, who hurrahed ! as the buggy came within sight.

“ Hulloa ! there,” called the coachman.

“ What ho ! ” answered Robert, and suchlike ejaculations fell from nearly every occupant of the coach, as Lucy drove past.

They had not got much farther along when Lucy had to pull in to one of the same nooks to enable a bullock wagon to pass. Hilda was terrified as the big horny beasts slowly passed the buggy, the big horns of the near side bullocks almost grazing her sleeves as they passed, and eyeing her with their great liquid eyes the while.

Isabel and Hugh were not watching the bullocks, their time was far too precious, doubly precious to Hugh because it was stolen. Not that he dishonoured his word to Mick by look or deed. To do him justice, he was treating Isabel, as far as he knew, as he would a friend and nothing more. It was in Isabel's self that the improvement had come. Isabel, the quiet, self-possessed Isabel, babbling like a running brook with shining eyes and glowing cheeks.

It did not seem strange that Hugh kept his

heart from speaking ; of course she didn't even dream of such a thing, she was almost a stranger to him, but in her heart she was sure of him. Sure of his honour, his love and his first care, now and for evermore.

Sometimes, when they were riding along, his hand would stray on her horse's mane. Once he forgot and let it rest on her hand, but almost instantly he withdrew it. Isabel looked up quickly and blushed like a schoolgirl, but Hugh recovering himself pointed out the beauty of the silvery water trickling over some rocks deep down in the gorge, and she was reassured, thinking that it was for that reason that he took his hand away. After that he kept guard over his actions and speech.

Isabel did not notice, though ; she was so intensely happy that to her the whole world was glorified. Idle flirtation would have meant nothing to her ; she would not have understood it in the least. To her it was enough to have a soul companion, who, her heart told her, was pure-minded and whole-souled, and who cared for the things she cared for.

Hugh was surprised and humbled at the broad expanse of her mind. Surprised to know that this country girl was versed, not only in an orthodox religion but in a deep thinking, overpowering knowledge of the wants of the masses, that would put many of our modern men of theology to shame. Humbled to think of all the precious time he had

frittered away in idle, useless flirtations and frivolous society.

Isabel drew rein to point out a splendid view of the surrounding country. They were on a high ridge, and could plainly discern the Gippsland lakes, Victoria, Wellington and King, the town of Sale and surrounding country. The towns about Craigieowen looked only a few miles away in comparison. Far away beyond, the hills stretched out blue, and the rung trees on the Calignee hills looked like a myriad of white tombstones. Overhead from the side of the hill, where they had drawn rein, hung the clematis in great clusters, sending out its sweet aroma to be caught up with that of the wild sarsaparilla creeper, which was trailing all over the sides of the cutting or running deep down in the gully, leaping logs and stumps, even twining over stones and rocks and bracken fern. The mountain buttercups and bluebells peeped out shyly from the shelter of the logs and undergrowth.

"Everywhere, in every little nook and cranny Nature abounds," thought Hugh, "and at my side is the most perfect of all these natural things."

"Why are you looking so wistful at me?" Isabel asked him.

"I was only thinking," he answered, "of the time when I will have to go back and leave all this. Isabel, I hate the very thought of it; but there's one thing," he added, "my life can never

run in the old grooves now I have known you——” He pulled himself up short and stammered, she knew not what, but took very little notice.

“Nor my life,” she answered. “I am glad that you came to stay at the farm.”

The one short week that he had so generously given to Mick was like a lifetime now to him. He had so many opportunities now to try his luck, and his heart was crying out his love, but his tongue was tied. He had noticed her look strangely at him twice now when he had stopped abruptly.

“What a blundering idiot she will think me!” he told himself.

Five miles out of Walhalla they came to the Thompson river, where they found the others had called a halt and were having refreshment on its bank, for just about the bridge there is a clear level space, covered with grasses and moss.

Robert was explaining the discoloration of the river, caused through the wash dirt from the mines.

When they remounted Hilda gladly took her horse again. They were all tired and anxious to get to their destination, although they were thoroughly enjoying the beautiful scenery.

The last great ridge, called “The little Joe,” was mounted, and then began the descent. The sun was shedding its last rays of glorious gold, which left its light on the hills and trees and began to cast shadows in the gullies when they began to go down the great cutting. Down, down, then a

bend in the road, and one of the most unique, if not the most beautiful, scenes in Australia presented itself to their view.

Walhalla was named after a mountain resort in Switzerland, and at this time had about five thousand inhabitants, of the mining classes. The little town is built between two high hills, with Stringer's creek running clean through the middle of the gully and town. A creek, by the way, which was a decided nuisance and danger in the early mining days, when the town was in a state of makeshift. A sharp shower was enough to swell this mountain stream and cause mischief; but in later days it was walled in on both sides and neat little rustic bridges, with white painted handrails, were placed at intervals across it.

The hotel which Robert had arranged for them to stay at was the first on entering the town, and consequently the quietest, if one can possibly reconcile the noise of a crushing battery with quietness. Not only the noise of the stampers as they crushed the gold quartz, but the hill being immediately behind, the sound re-echoed.

They were all too tired, however, for the sounds to trouble or disturb them during the night, but it awakened them very early in the morning, and they found it impossible to get a wink of sleep after that. Lucy took them out before breakfast to view the cemetery from afar. They had only a short distance to go before they were immedi-

ately under it, but to have actually arrived within its enclosure would have meant exertion that even the Rothsays would not attempt fasting.

The little path leading to it began at the foot of the hill and zig-zagged its way around boulders and chasms, over little plateaus, and still up until it arrived at a fairly level enclosure. Lucy graphically described a funeral she had witnessed there, some years before, of a popular schoolgirl.

Four men carried the coffin and were relieved at intervals by men stationed on the plateaus. The entire school-children turned out, dressed in white, and half the townspeople marching behind in pairs. "It was the most imposing sight I ever saw to see those sad, resolute people marching up the face of that hill. I stood down amongst those trees," continued Lucy, pointing to them, "and I tell you I felt very strange as I watched them wind up there carrying the dear child, with the children in hundreds following. I almost began to think they were seeing her part of the way to Heaven."

Immediately after breakfast they began a tour of inspection through this quaint little town, with its cottages, one above the other, perched on the sides of the hills and the long tiers of steps winding about to the levels. Its long straggling street with the business places all on one side, facing the creek, the cool willows dipping into its waters and the little white bridges leading into people's gardens, which were glowing with bright

flowers ; the tram lines on plateaus cut out of the face of the hill, the mines and batteries and noise, was a sight which would live for ever in their minds.

All the morning was spent visiting the mines and batteries, the men going down the famous " great long tunnel," while the ladies were escorted up on the little tram-lines and looked down on the town. On two occasions they had to stand perfectly still in small grooves while the long team of horses passed with the quartz trucks. They all held their breaths while the team passed. The line was so narrow and grooved, as it was, out of the face of the hill, the least fright to them meant almost certain death to them and their driver.

It was a most exciting day, visiting the mines, going underground, watching the quartz and chordwood being tipped down the " shoots " ; talking to the kindly miners, listening to a party of Italian wood-getters singing an Italian part song, in perfect harmony—which they enjoyed most of all.

Before the sun set the young folk set out to climb the highest peak in the locality. It was a good long walk and lay away at the other end of the town, and meant some hard climbing which the scenery amply compensated for. At their feet and all about them was wild scrub, but away in the direction of their home they could see over a tremendous stretch of country, rich grazing and farming lands with their paddocks of cultivation.

When they faced about they could only see the

hills getting more and more rugged, and from the deep purple close at hand they merged into a clearer blue, and away, more than twenty miles, they could see the crown of Mount Baw Baw like a fleecy cloud, for the snow lay many feet deep then. They, sat about and watched the sun dip behind the hills and the hares, almost at their feet, scudding home to their nests. A heavy dew began to fall and Robert hurried them away. Lucy and Gwen ran off first, leaving the others to follow. It was well the girls had hurried, for by the time that Isabel and Hugh, who were some distance behind the others, had arrived at the mouth of the gully, darkness had set in. Isabel knew the way, or they might have had difficulty in getting back.

Hugh had not offered his arm to her, for each moment was making it hard for him to keep his promise to Mick as it was. But just as they were at the end of the gully and about to enter a narrow path, which led over a ridge into the street, two Italians, who were camped close by, rushed out right on to the path before them and began fighting furiously and hurling most awful epithets at each other in their own language. They were intoxicated and hardly knew what they were doing. A few furious lurches and down they both crashed into the bush and bracken, which grew alongside the path and a foot or two from where Isabel stood. Hugh and she had looked on in amazement, the onslaught had been so sudden, but when they

fell she gave a cry of alarm. Instantly Hugh stepped to her side and without a moment's thought picked her up in his arms, stepped over the men's feet and hurried up the steep path.

Before he released her from his arms he pressed her to his breast with a passion that almost hurt her. "My Isabel, you are safe with me," he whispered. As he put her down, he thought of Mick. "Forgive me, Miss Isabel! I forgot," he said absently.

She did not ask him what he meant; she was sure of his love, and her mind was full of the men they had left huddled in the ferns.

"Oh please, Hugh, let us go back; these poor fellows might die there," she said.

"Take you back there, Isabel? Oh no, I could not dream of it; the scamps will be all right. I will tell those men in that hut there to go to them," answered Hugh. Which he did, but he kept her hand tightly in his right through the town back to the hotel. A small thing in itself, but it made her heart glow.

Hugh took her straight into the dining-room, where the rest were taking tea together, with some Broken Hill mining magnates, who fixed their eyes on Isabel the moment she entered the room with her flushed face and sparkling eyes. Their good-natured old landlord introduced them, and the younger men contrived to draw the girls into a conversation. The men's eyes followed Isabel

as she passed out. The old landlord laughed. "No go, boys; it's the early bird who catches the worm," he said.

"But, I say! aren't they brother and sister?" asked one of them who had noticed Robert's attentions to Hilda.

"Yes. But that makes no difference. I'll tell you what I can do, though; ask her to sing for you," he answered.

"Does she sing?"

"Yes, like a nightingale. I'll go and ask her." Which he did. Isabel flushed and appealed to her mother.

"I don't know but what you might, dear. They seem gentlemanly men and we will go with you."

After a while they all followed her into the parlour and she made the place ring again. At first she was shy and her voice trembled, but after awhile she gained confidence and her sweet and powerful voice touched their very souls. Hugh sat in the shadow and was glad his face could not be seen. "My Isabel—mine, mine," he kept repeating. Isabel looked around and gave him a bright smile before she left the piano.

While Isabel had been singing a new-found sympathy had sprung up in Hilda's heart for her. "I will confide in her this very night and try to gain her love," she thought; and when Isabel left the room she followed her out, only to find Hugh there as soon as herself.

"Now Hugh, I want Isabel for a little while myself; I want to talk to her."

"Can't we both talk to her?" he asked.

"No, we can't, so just take yourself off."

"Whew!" whistled Hugh, but consoled himself with man's comforter—a good cigar.

The girls walked off silently. Hilda wanted so much to confide in Isabel, but she hardly knew how to begin, so talked of herself, hoping to work around presently.

"Oh, Isabel! imagine going back to the old life of inertia after being amongst these hills, if only for to-day," she began.

"My dear Hilda, I can't at all see the necessity for it being a life of inertia," answered Isabel.

"That's very well to say, because you do not understand; you live here among all this, untrammelled by society, and I tell you that were we to change places you would feel the same," Hilda said petulantly, for she had not meant to begin her talk in that strain.

"I do not think I would," answered Isabel, linking her arm within Hilda's. "I would not be trammelled by society for one thing; and for another, although I do not care for city life, still I would find so much to take my attention that I would not have time to be dull."

"While it was a new thing; but when the newness wore off, you would be like the rest of us," retorted Hilda.

“No, I don’t think I should,” repeated Isabel. “I realize the importance of living too fully to frit my time and energies away in a useless, ceaseless round of late suppers, parties and theatres just because a certain section of society would expect me to follow them like sheep. Of course, if one just follows the bait thrown out by the stronger members of a frivolous society, one can expect nothing else but a weakening mental capacity, and consequently a very limited knowledge of the joy of living.”

“My dear Isabel, you are quite an orator, but you fail to convince me. Would you have us go about in poke bonnets and Salvation brooches and keep away from all cultivated society?” she asked.

“Not at all,” laughed Isabel. “It is cultivated society that I am wondering at. How can a cultured people, and especially the rich, have the conscience to complain of inertia? I would expect to hear it from the vulgar, jewel-decked men and women who had sprung up like a castor-oil plant, and one would excuse a poverty-stricken people, who were nearly distracted with the routine of work and sleep, sleep and work, with bread and water as luxuries; but the cultured and well-to-do—ah! they are more to blame than any of the other classes. They have been given so much, and they selfishly hoard it to themselves and cry out for more.”

Hilda unlinked her arm. “Then the half of

us who were not Salvationists you would make Socialists, I presume?" she asked sarcastically.

"Oh no, I wouldn't. I do not hold with the Socialist. I believe what a man works for is honestly his own. As for the Salvationists, they are a great people and do a great good. They have rescued thousands of unfortunates going straight to perdition, who would have perished, body and soul, had they been left to the tender mercies of our aristocratic ministry. Hilda, understand me. God has given you a beautiful home, good position, education, servants, abundance of health, good looks—in short, everything—you who might have had so little; and then you fume at the thought of going back to them all. Even the dull weariness you complain of, you bring on yourself. You go against the natural laws of health, turn night into day, and then complain."

"But," stammered Hilda, "we are not all religious like you, and I for one could not lead a Quaker's life." For the moment she forgot her new self and her love. Habit is a hard taskmaster.

"I am very much afraid, Hilda, that I wouldn't lead a Quaker's life either. I am too fond of life for that. You see, there are so many less fortunate people who need a helping hand that I would not have to feel dull, and I'd take good care, no matter how much I wanted to be giddy, that I would not abuse that musical and beloved organ, the liver,

for it is accountable for more peevishness and dissatisfaction than we are half aware of."

"Isabel, you are a queer girl. I wish I had thought more of these things. I believe—yes, and know, that you are right. Do you know, it never struck me to think of other people's wants? In society we never run across women who talk as you are doing. I wish we were better friends, Isabel. You must write to me when I go back home," and she linked her arm through Isabel's once more.

"You mustn't talk of going back yet, Hilda; indeed, we were only asking your father to-day to extend your visit."

"You are very kind and I would love to stay, but Hugh would have to go back, and I wouldn't like him to be back there alone," answered Hilda.

"Why should he go back when the change is doing him so much good?" asked Isabel.

"He is just beginning for himself, and such a long stay in the country would unsettle him; besides, being a man he would naturally tire of the country quicker than I," Hilda answered absently. She hardly knew what she was talking about, for her whole mind had turned to Robert. She was just making up her mind to tell Isabel that henceforth the word "inertia" would have no place in her life, which had been given to her own brother, when Hugh and Gwen ran up to them, and the opportunity was lost.

CHAPTER XI

THE COST OF A PROMISE

HILDA'S remark rankled in Isabel's mind. "What right had she to dictate the length of her brother's holiday indeed?" she asked herself; but with a good night's rest all was forgotten and she came out from her room as fresh as the spring violets which grew so plentifully in her own garden and just as pure and sweet.

Justice Harwood and Mrs. Rothsay had accepted an invitation to take luncheon with the manager of one of the big mines and his wife, and the young people decided to go along to the mouth of the creek, and pay a visit to the weir as well, for they intended returning home later in the afternoon.

The landlady put up a basket of lunch and they set off in great glee. The morning was glorious; there had just been enough frost to make the sun seem very acceptable. They went up the steps which led to the little Anglican church and thence up on to the ledge half way up the side of the hill, where a tram line ran.

The little town lay all around them, with the sun glinting on the roofs, wet with the melting of

the night's frost. Right down in the gully ran the creek, its banks getting wilder and more wooded as they left the town behind. The first bend they took left the town hidden from view and not a house or building of any kind to be seen with the exception of a hut and small cyanide works, which were placed at intervals along the creek to catch any wash gold, before it entered the river. They made a pleasant addition to the already beautiful scenery, with their great wheels going around and lapping up the buckets of white sand, and the wild scrub and trees and wattle blossom and creepers in profusion all around them. Once they had to stand out on a ledge, to allow a large team drawing trucks of cordwood to pass by them. As they got further out, they were able to leave the tram line and get on a broader track which was used for the timber wagons.

It was all so fresh and wild and beautiful. Gwen said it was like a concert with the birds singing, and the water falling over the stones as an accompaniment, "and we are all receiving it in our hearts like a phonograph, so fire a volley," she shouted.

Such cooeing and shouting and laughter followed that it was enough to rouse the sleeping hills.

When they had got some distance from the river bridge they all went further down into the gully and had the contents of the basket, together with the sweets and oranges which Hugh had bought. The men got water from a mountain spring, clear

as crystal and sweet and cool, which they drunk out of tin pannikins.

Shut in from the world, with beautiful things everywhere, was it strange that they should be lighthearted? The weight of outside trouble and worry and the hundred and one petty trials are all banished for the time at any rate, and one's heart is made light and glad. Would that more of our city folk would go to such places, instead of chasing each other to pokey little seaside resorts, expensive and evil smelling, just because it is fashionable and the crowd is flocking there!

Gwen, as usual, was the life of them all. She dragged a long pole which she found in the gully and made Bob place it across a big lichen-covered log and then lift Hilda on one end of it, while she scrambled on the other, to the amusement of the others.

Hilda, who had not been on a see-saw since she was a little child, was no sooner in the air than she fell.

Then began a see-saw tournament, Hilda as time-keeper. The successful winner—that is, the one who hung on the longest—was to have a box of chocolates or a good cigar. The girls soon tired of the game and sat and laughed at Bob and Hugh, at their attempts to keep on the pole sitting sideways. When at last they too grew tired of tumbling off and their sides ached with laughter, they both made for the luncheon basket.

Hugh took a handful of sandwiches and Bob was just in the act of taking the last that remained, when Gwen and Lucy snapped the basket out of his hand and ran up the steep hill on to the cutting.

Bob was in quick pursuit, and thinking to take a shorter way and cut off their escape, he ran up the steepest part of the hill.

As very often happens, he found that the shortest way was not the quickest, for just as he got near the top a stone slipped under his feet and he came sliding back at a great rate, to his own amusement and Isabel's ; but Hilda and Hugh took it seriously and ran to where he had rolled. His only gratitude was a roar of laughter as he bounded up the hill again. Hugh and his sister followed slowly, leaving Isabel gathering up the stray handkerchiefs and oranges scattered about. They walked along talking until they got around a sharp bend in the road, and then sat down on some rocks and waited for Isabel.

These two, brother and sister, had had so little opportunity of having a quiet talk for a whole week now. Not that they were used to confiding in each other. But there had come a change in their lives, and each felt a new attachment to the other—a new desire for confidence.

Try as they would, neither of them could bring their tongue to speak the wishes of their heart. They were each afraid of springing a great surprise on the other by such a digression from what society

would expect. They spoke of their visit, of Gwen, of the enjoyment of the trip, everything, in fact, but what they most wanted to.

"Let us go back around the bend and see what can be keeping Isabel," Hugh said after a pause in their conversation. They slowly retraced their steps, and then Hilda sat down on a ledge that shot out from the cutting, and they waited for her for awhile.

"Surely she cannot have gone on without our seeing her?" asked Hilda.

"I suppose she must have, but we had better wait a few minutes and see. Remember you haven't got a town girl to deal with in her, one who gets lost twenty times during one picnic," answered her brother.

Hilda laughed. "Yes, like Lallah Rencliffe did last month; but she knew very well that you would find her each time."

"I suppose she did; she always had a knack of making me do exactly what she wanted," he answered lazily.

"Yes, my dear Hugh; and if I am not very much mistaken, her tasks were very agreeable to you."

Hugh shrugged his shoulders. "Well, and why not? One must have a companion," and he took up some stones and began pelting into the gully, as though the conversation was distasteful.

"But, Hugh, will you be as agreeable to marry Lallah as you were to flirt with her?" asked Hilda.

"Certainly I will, and may I ask will you be as agreeable to marry Doctor Jack as you were to flirt with him?" said Hugh irritably.

"Oh, I never was very struck on him. With Lallah and you it was different; she always was madly in love with you."

"Confound it all, Hilda! This isn't the kind of talk for these hills. I thought you were going to talk of something else. I tell you I mean to enjoy myself to-day and forget all about Lallah or Scrallah," Hugh said savagely.

Hilda took his hand. "All right, Hugh. I did mean to talk of something else, and I will too. Isabel must have gone on to the others. I am getting nervous here too. I can hear the snakes running all over the place. I am sure that there is a wombat or some other porcupiny creature down there, I hear such noises."

They walked off. "Hilda, dear, I'm a cross old bear, but you have no idea how it jars on my nerves to hear the very name of Lallah Rencliffe now. How I ever had the patience to speak to her, leave alone take her about, I can't conceive. Besides, although I suppose I did flirt with her a little, I never gave her the least encouragement to suppose I cared for her; there's no telling what I might have drifted into had we not come up here. Look here, Hilda, there's no use mincing matters with you, for I honestly believe we are both in the same predicament. I love Isabel and mean to ask her

to be my wife, and unless I'm very much mistaken, Bob has asked, or will ask, you the same question, and you will agree."

Hilda burst out laughing, a loud clear merry laugh that rang down through the gullies and brought a cooee from Bob and the girls. Hugh had looked so comically guilty, but when she laughed he joined in. The others were making their way back to them and she only just had time to tell Hugh all about it.

"Where is Isabel?" Hugh asked them.

"We thought she was with you," they answered in chorus.

A loud nervous cooee from Hugh failed to elicit any response.

Gwen, however, was able to throw some light on the subject. Isabel had told her that she wanted to sketch one of the big cyanide wheels back along the creek, so very likely she had retraced her steps and set to work on it. A plan so feasible to Bob, knowing her passion for scenery, that he proposed that they should go down to the river and do a bit of fishing and not disturb her.

Hugh agreed with very bad grace; but he was so uneasy that presently he threw down his line and said he was "off to find her."

He was longing for a sight of her pure young face. His conversation of Lallah Rencliffe had left a disagreeable feeling which he could not shake off. He felt ashamed to think he had ever been so friendly

with her. "A poor, frivolous, empty-headed little fool," was his designation of her now.

As he thought of Isabel, he began humming, "My love is like a red, red rose," smiling to himself, until presently the words rose to his lips and he sang them with all his heart.

To think of her purified his soul.

But Isabel! where was she? When the others had left her gathering up the stray things she was the lightest-hearted creature one could imagine. By the time she was ready to follow them, Hilda and Hugh had gained the cutting and Isabel stood lost in admiration of him.

How long she would have remained there thinking of him it is difficult to determine, had she not been startled by a great black snake, lying right across her path—a great shining, curling brute that writhed its head and wriggled its body.

It was no uncommon sight to Isabel to see a snake; nevertheless, she managed to keep one eye on the reptile while she looked for a safe retreat. There was no stick handy enough for her to attempt to kill him, so she decided to make a dash for a log a few feet back, which spanned a deep ditch, half filled with timber and prickly bush. She was all but a step across when she heard the snake gliding over the leafy ground; she gave a frightened glance behind, lost her footing, and came crash down through the prickles and bush and landed in the bottom of the ditch.

She was in a plight, but it never struck her to call for help, although she was bruised and bleeding. Hanging on to the bushes, she dragged herself up the steep banks. She caught a glimpse of the snake slowly gliding off in the opposite direction, so she was safe from him.

Instantly she looked to see if Hilda and Hugh had seen her, and was relieved to see them just turning the bend. She felt sore and shaken, and her ankle was bleeding profusely. She was scratched from knee to ankle, and her stocking was hanging over her shoe torn into ribbons.

In her fear lest Hugh should come back and see her plight, she dragged her aching limbs up the steep hill and sat down in a little sort of a cave which almost undermined part of the cutting.

Between the torn ankle and the shaking, she felt faint and dizzy. She closed her eyes and rested awhile. Presently she could hear them come back to look for her. Whatever could she do? She could not let Hugh see her in that condition; he would worry, and that would spoil their happy time. Besides, she blushed scarlet to think of him seeing her without her stocking, for one was hanging about her shoe and the other little better; her skirt was all torn, and altogether she presented a forlorn appearance. She must contrive to get Hilda alone. Then their voices came right overhead and she heard her own name. To her it seemed that Hugh lingered lovingly over it, and

in her great love she stretched out her arms in the direction of his voice. She kept perfectly quiet. But what was this they were saying? Lallah Rencliffe! who was she? . . . Then Hugh's voice; "I suppose she did; she always had a knack of making me do exactly what she wanted."

Isabel felt a shudder run through her. Then Hilda spoke again, and Hugh's answer: "Well, and why not? One must have a companion." She felt confused. She had not heard Hugh speak in that drawl before. The black snake came into her mind. Was it a bad omen? She could see the stones dropping down into the gully, some flicked down past her little cave and a few even struck the very spot where she had fallen in the ditch.

She was foolish. Hugh was too true a man to—to what? she asked herself. Then Hilda spoke again. "But Hugh, will you be as agreeable to marry Lallah as you were to flirt with her?"

Isabel grew white and rigid, and strained her ears for his answer.

"Certainly I will," came clear and strong to her fast-ebbing senses. She lost the rest of the sentence.

Hilda was speaking again. "Oh, I never was very struck on him. With Lallah and you it was different; she always was madly in love with you."

Hugh's concluding sentence seemed to be growing further and further off; all she could remember

of it was, " I tell you I mean to enjoy myself to-day," and the tone seemed brutal.

Then a long silence. Isabel was oblivious to sights and sounds, for she lay unconscious. She heard no cooee, she heard no laughter. It was after Hugh had passed looking for her that she stirred herself and sat up. Her head was burning ; she put up her hands and tried to think. Then the horror of the thing came to her. She, Isabel Rothsay, had given a man her love unsought. A man who was only enjoying himself at her expense. She had shown heart and soul to this man who would go back to his Lallah and make fun of her. All the glory that seemed to be resting on her had vanished, leaving only darkness. What a disgrace ! She would gladly have died then and there ; and she had thought him the soul of honour, he whom she had exalted into her king. " If he is not true, who is ? " she asked herself. " He was like some one sent from another world, and now to find him with less honour than those who do not pretend to love me at all," and poor disappointed Isabel lay down her head and sobbed.

When her storm had passed she dried her eyes. " I am thankful I know the kind of man he is, and my earnest prayer is that I will have the strength to withstand him and all men."

Her one wish now was to avoid him. Even as she thought of the possibility of his finding her there, she got excited. Fixing the best part of her

stocking about her swollen ankle, she was about to come out of her hiding place, when she heard Hugh away along the cutting, singing with all his might. Her breath came sharp and heavy. Would he come back? No, there was no fear; he was keeping to the track. She could hear the words he was singing quite plainly. It was Burns' "Red, red rose," and he was singing the two last verses when she heard him.

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will luv thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

"And fare thee weel, my only luv!
And fare thee weel a while!
And I will come again, my luv,
Though it were ten thousand mile."

Isabel listened until he had finished the last verse, and began on the first again. "Oh, Hugh! Hugh! how can you sing that while my heart breaks?" and fresh tears trickled down her face, but she wiped them resolutely away. "No, no, I can make no excuse for him," she thought in answer to her own question. "No excuse, but I really believe that he does care; but he gave his time and heart to her first, and I will never come between them. Hilda said that Lallah was madly in love with him; I cannot blame her, poor girl! I hope he will love her. Ah! that's what Hilda meant last night: 'Hugh would soon tire of the

country,' and now I understand lots of things in his manner ; he asked me to forgive him, when he put his arm around me yesterday," and Isabel groaned aloud and then with an inward prayer for his safety and happiness she thought out her plans.

It would be difficult to keep Hugh at arm's length while he was her mother's guest ; for she believed in her heart still that he cared for her society, but that must make not a particle of difference, she would not help to his dishonour, even for the pleasure of his society. If his Lallah believed in him and loved him, then she must have him. No half love would content Isabel.

She waited awhile and was about to peep out, when she heard him coming back. She held her breath. Soon he was passing right overhead, an agitated, quick stride. When his footsteps died right away and she knew he had passed the bend, she got out and scrambled to the cutting and sped like a hare away back towards the town.

She forgot all about her torn stocking and the pain of the ankle. Her one desire was to get away from close proximity to the man she loved. When she had gone about a mile, she met two axemen coming towards her and stopped them.

" Are you going towards the river ? " she asked them.

" Yes, miss."

" Will you tell a picnic party you will find there,

that I am going back to the hotel. I slipped and hurt my ankle, so please say that I am going to fix up a bit and that I am all right and not to trouble about me." Her voice quivered as she concluded the sentence, and the kindly woodcutter noted it.

"But, missy, you must let us take you back; you look ill," said the elder man.

"Oh no, indeed I'm not. Thank you all the same, but please tell them, won't you?" and she gave them a bright smile which was nearly her undoing.

"We will that, miss, and I hope you get back all right," he answered.

It seemed a long weary way before she did get to the hotel. The sun was hot and strong and made her feel faint. All her buoyancy had gone. She crossed the creek much nearer the hotel and so avoided the inquisitive gaze of the hotel loungers along the street. Her mother was not in yet, so she went to her room and bathed her face and foot. She sent the housemaid for a pair of new stockings and mended her dress in the meanwhile.

The housemaid told the landlady, who came bustling in, and soon had liniment on the foot and a refreshment tray before Isabel, insisting on her taking some food, and then the motherly old soul would not leave the room until she was apparently asleep, and Isabel was glad enough to let her think so, and to lie in the darkened room. The ankle

did pain horribly, and she was very glad ; it would be a reasonable excuse for her not riding home with Hugh, and the fall would account for her drawn look. " Anything, anything rather than let him think I am repining," she thought. She was glad that she knew ; now her pride must help her out.

When Hugh arrived back without Isabel, the others were alarmed. Hugh himself was in a fever of excitement. Before they got back to the spot where they had seen her last, however, they met the two men, who gave her message to them. They all plied the men with eager questions : " Did she look ill or limp, or what ? "

" She limped, and she looked bad enough, I tell you," answered one of the men. " But she's the sweetest-looking young lady that I've seen in a day's walk," he added. For which, Hugh could have shared up his possessions with him ; as it was, when the rest thanked the men and hurried on he lingered behind a minute and slipped a sovereign into his hand. The man withdrew his hand as though he had been stung.

" No, you don't ! what's this for ? " he asked. Hugh coloured.

" To drink her health with," he answered.

" When I want to drink her health I buy my own brain-rotter ; keep your spoofer for your town johnnies, and remember, young man, that a born and bred Gippslander never takes money unless

he works for it," and they walked off leaving Hugh standing looking at his money.

"What's up?" asked Bob, as he came up with them.

"Oh, nothing; only your Gippslanders are cussedly independent," he said shortly.

"More power to them," answered Bob, and the matter dropped; but Hugh could not shake off the impression that the men thought he had something to do with her accident.

The landlady told them that Isabel was sleeping and had better not be disturbed, and when her mother returned she at once went to her bedroom and found her still apparently asleep. They decided to abandon the home-going until the morning.

When Lucy looked in a little later she went softly to the bedside and found her awake.

"Oh, Izy darling, you are ill," and Lucy knelt beside her and kissed her.

"No, Lucy dear, not ill, but I did get a terrible shaking."

Then Hilda and Gwen came in and wanted to hear all about it. Isabel was guarded, and told them of her fright and fall and how she scrambled out of the ditch and fainted afterwards and then got back to the hotel.

Mrs. Rothsay, who examined the foot, insisted on a doctor; and the doctor, when he came, insisted on perfect rest and quietness, all of which suited Isabel. Bob came and sat with her for

awhile and made a fuss over her. Hugh, because he could not see her, fumed and was so cross-grained and miserable that he retired early to get away from himself. His father, too, was anxious about his favourite, and understood his boy's anxiety.

Had the gladness of yesterday been in her heart, the pain of her ankle would not have mattered much to her. She was enduring more mental than physical pain. All night she struggled desperately with her conscience. The thought of letting Hugh go out of her life almost drove her to forget the words which she had heard, and win him.

When the first streak of dawn showed through her window, Isabel's fight was over and she had conquered. Henceforth her heart would be sealed. She slept until the get-up bell went and then got up and dressed. To her mother's anxious inquiries she declared herself much better and insisted on walking out to breakfast.

She tried to look as cheerful as possible, but it was a pale, sad-faced girl whom Justice Harwood hurried forward to meet. It was impossible to mistake his real pleasure in seeing her again.

"Here, Hugh, come and welcome Isabel." Hugh had his back turned to them, talking to two gentlemen and looking very glum indeed. At his father's words he gave a great bound and was at her side in a few strides, with both hands stretched out and his heart shining in his honest eyes.

Isabel was not prepared for this. She had in-

tended to speak pleasantly, and to keep him at arm's-length ; but to meet him thus ! Instinct told her that, if she took his hands, she was lost and Lallah would lose her husband.

For one brief second she stood irresolute, with a mist before her eyes, then the room swam around and she lurched forward in a swoon.

Hugh stood as if petrified. It was his father who caught her and was about to carry her out when he came to himself. He gently took her out of his father's arms and carried her to her room, his father and Mrs. Rothsay followed. While her mother administered brandy Hugh knelt by the bed and held her hands. He was almost as white as she was, and the perspiration stood in great drops on his forehead.

" Isabel, speak to me," he groaned.

" Hugh, keep quiet, my boy ; she will recover presently."

" Father, I cannot lose her ; she looks like death itself," answered Hugh, raining kisses on her white hands.

" Stand back, Hugh, and have patience ; she will come to presently."

" But, father—you don't know—I love her. She is mine—she belongs to me only," he cried passionately.

" And I am thankful for it, my boy," answered his father brokenly.

Mrs. Rothsay's delicate face flushed. " Hugh,

has she promised?" she asked gently. It hurt her to think that Isabel had not told her.

"No, I have not asked her yet; but I am sure she loves me," he answered feebly.

Mrs. Rothsay looked relieved and held out her hand. "Whenever you have her word, my boy, my consent will already be given."

Hugh looked his thanks, but it was heartfelt.

Presently Isabel opened her eyes and sighed. Her mother motioned to him to move away. Isabel stretched out her arms, moaned, and presently dropped off into a peaceful sleep. She had fainted from nervous shock, but now it was pure exhaustion which made her sleep. Her mother thought otherwise and sent Hugh for the doctor.

When he heard of Isabel's symptoms, he shook his head and went in and had a look at her. He watched her for a few minutes, and then beckoned her mother out of the room.

"That ankle wouldn't account for a strong girl, like she is, fainting. Has she quarrelled with that young man?"

"Quarrelled with Hugh? Most certainly not; they are the best of friends."

"Are you sure they did not have a difference yesterday?"

"Quite sure. She was in the gayest spirits when she fell, so they tell me," answered her mother.

"Then I do not understand it. She seems as though she had something on her mind."

"Isabel has no trouble whatever," emphatically said her mother.

"Then she has been overworking her strength for those guests of yours, and you must keep her quiet," he said as he left.

CHAPTER XII

THE LOST CROSS

A FEW hours later Isabel awoke, feeling refreshed and looking much better.

"Who took me in here, Gwen dear?" she asked when Gwen and she were alone.

"Hugh carried you in; he is in such a state about you, Izy."

"Indeed! He is very foolish," she answered coldly.

"Oh, Izy! Why, he loves the very ground you tread on."

"Don't be ridiculous, Gwen! I shall be very hurt if you talk like that again. I will never give any man the right to love me, now or any other time. So please to remember," she answered sharply.

"Oh, Isabel, what's gone wrong with you? You have never spoken like that to me before," said poor Gwen, with tears in her eyes.

Isabel's arms were about her instantly. "I'm a crabby old thing, dear, and do not mind me; but,

Gwen, you know what a stickler I am for liberty, so please, dear, never mention a word to me about love again while you live."

"But, Izy, Hugh——" began Gwen.

Isabel took her arms away. "I don't want to hear about him."

"All right, Izy; I will remember if you will be nice to me again."

"Of course I will, dear, and you'll go and get me a good breakfast, won't you? And, Gwen, I'll have to ask you to ride home, while I take your place—my foot, you know," she said, kissing her.

"Yes, of course I will, but you can't go home to-day. Mother and the rest say so; but I'll get you something nice to eat," said Gwen.

"Listen to me, Gwen. I don't want anything too nice, but something very substantial—I'm starving; and if the rest are not going home, I am, so run off, like a dear."

Gwen ran off and soon returned with a tray-load big enough to satisfy two hungry men; but, to Gwen's delight, Isabel made it look very much smaller; then, when Gwen had packed their few things and donned the habit, Isabel surprised her family by brightly limping into their midst.

It was just what they could expect from her, and being anxious to go home they gladly acted on her lead.

Poor Hugh! She gave him a smile and handshake exactly the same as she gave to his father,

no more ; and when he pressed close to where she sat, she closed her eyes as though weary.

" Isabel, you can't tell how mad I am with myself for leaving you alone yesterday," he said in an undertone.

She slowly opened her eyes. " Good gracious ! you are very foolish ; how do you expect I got on all those years before you came ? " she answered in an indifferent tone.

To Hugh her voice sounded harsh and quite unlike herself. He stole a look at her face. All her radiance had gone and in its place sat pride. He felt hurt, but attributed it to her state of health, and went off and helped Bob with the horses.

Isabel watched her chance, and when she saw Bob alone by the buggy for a second she limped out and he helped her in. Hugh had to put up with Gwen for a companion, and make the best of it. Isabel sat very still beside Justice Harwood. Whenever they passed one of her favourite spots, which she had pointed out to Hugh with such enthusiasm only two short days before, she closed her eyes.

Hugh gathered a bunch of clematis and heath and gave it to her, hoping to please her. " Thanks, aren't they beautiful ? " was all she said ; but she carried them on her lap as though she hated to part with them, and when she got a chance she broke off a wee bit of each and hid them in her bosom.

When they halted for lunch, the Justice and Bob

helped her out before Hugh caught up with them. The day was just as fine and the scenery just as beautiful ; yet for two of them the glory had faded. Even the sweet, fresh, mossy dell where they lunched didn't rouse Isabel. They thought they all knew how she must be suffering from her hurt, and she could not undeceive them.

Hugh was aching for one kind look or word. What he could have said or done he puzzled his brains to know. No, Isabel was too sensible and generous for any small thing to have altered her manner so.

After lunch Bob and the three girls went to give the horses a drink, and he had a chance of speaking to her alone.

He sat down on the grass beside her. " Isabel, will you tell me how I have offended you ? " he asked.

" Offended me ? you have not offended me, Mr. Harwood, in the least."

Hugh bit his lip. " Then why are you adding a prefix to my name and why are you avoiding me ? " he asked.

" I was not aware that I avoided you, and as for the prefix—well, I believe I was rash enough to drop it for a day. I really beg your pardon," she answered with well-assumed good nature.

Hugh knelt by her side. " Isabel, have mercy. I wish I dare speak, but I'm tied. You must decide for me. Isabel, if you gave a promise to some one, and then you found that, although it wouldn't

make any difference to them in the long run, the keeping of it might spoil your life, don't you think it would be right to break it ? " he spoke as though life or death hung in the balance.

Isabel's face paled, and she looked at him in amazement.

" I can't see why I should decide such apparently easy questions for you. I was taught to believe that one's honour was involved in the keeping of a promise, and I always adhere to that principle, no matter what it costs me," she said coldly.

Hugh got on his feet. " Then I am answered, Miss Isabel. Forgive me for troubling you," he said gently. " But won't you be friends again ? " he asked.

" Friends ! Oh, yes, Mr. Harwood. I will always count you amongst my best friends," she said in a kinder tone.

Her warmer tone brought him to her side again. " Isabel, do tell me what is making you treat me so differently," he pleaded.

" Am I treating you differently ? I beg your pardon. I'm afraid I always was patchy—full of moods ; but all my friends have to put up with that, you know ; besides, to tell you the truth, I am not feeling well to-day," she answered so wearily and looked so drawn that Hugh felt himself a brute to be troubling her.

" Yes, I know you are ill ; forgive me," and he walked away looking ten years older.

Isabel had borne her part bravely, but the shadows were deeper beneath her eyes and her face was more drawn. “ ‘He dare not speak, he is tied’; he makes me love him, and then tells me that ‘it will make no difference in the long run,’ ” she repeated. “Does that mean that he does not love his Lallah and means to give her up for a fresh face? ‘The keeping of his promise may spoil his life’—well, and the not keeping of it may spoil hers; so as he is the man he must suffer, and me along with him.” She looked so ill that her mother insisted on her taking the more comfortable front seat. She was hardly able to stand. Bob and the Justice helped her in again, and Hugh stood looking unhappy, to his father’s astonishment.

Old Paddy was grieved to hear of Isabel’s hurt, and offered to carry her into the house, but Hugh strode to the buggy and held out his arms. “Isabel, let me carry you.” He looked so determined that she could do nothing else without remark. He carried her to her room and laid her tenderly on the bed, then hesitated by Lucy’s side. Something in his attitude was so pathetic that Isabel was touched, and before she realized what she was doing she held out her hand, which he seized greedily with both his. “Thank you, my friend,” she said with closed eyes, and Hugh quitted the room with a lighter heart.

— “Only two more days of this misery,” he thought. But with Isabel it was “a lifetime of this misery.”

Next morning she awakened as only a healthy, vigorous girl could do, refreshed and seeing things not nearly as grey as yesterday. Her foot was much better and less swollen, and the deep jagged wound was healing quickly. She stretched her arms and sighed. "No longer an excuse to avoid him," but she was more able to hold her own now.

Hilda waited on her, and was very kind and surprised Isabel by the business-like way she arranged everything in the dining-room. "Why, Hilda, you would make a first-class nurse. I had no idea you were so domesticated.

"I am learning. I have learnt a great many things since I came here," she said blushing.

"Good morning, Miss Isabel. May I come in?" asked Hugh, coming in all the same.

"Of course you may. Will you take a cup of tea?"

"No, I've taken breakfast. I would rather talk to you if you will allow me?" he said.

"Certainly. I always enjoy listening; it saves me the bother of talking myself," she answered in a lazy fashion, helping herself to more tea to save taking his hand.

"It wasn't always a bother for you to talk," he said.

"Nearly always," she drolled.

"But it surely was not going to Walhalla?" he asked in a bewildered voice.

"I really can't remember, Mr. Harwood. I rarely

tell my thoughts, unless it is to old Paddy, and I am afraid he thinks I have enough to say sometimes."

"But, Isabel—Miss Isabel—surely you do not talk to Paddy like you did to me?" and Hugh looked eagerly into her flushed face.

"Good gracious! and why not? He is a dear old fellow, and I tell him all kinds of things about—about my future," she answered with more nerve.

"Will you tell me about your future?" he asked.

"Oh dear me! What a persistent man!" she answered with a forced laugh. "I could not dream of telling you about my castles in the air. I may be an old woman before they are half accomplished, or my voice may go 'broke,' as Bob says."

"And then?"

"And then," she repeated—"why, I might as well ask you what you intend calling your eldest grandchild? How do I know what is before me? Some day, when you have risen to the dignity of judgeship and have a dozen children about you, I may call in and tell you how I am getting on—that is, if your city wife will receive me," she added.

"My city wife! Is—Miss Isabel, I will never marry a city wife; there is but one woman in the world for me. I will have her or none," and in his agitation Hugh left the room.

Isabel covered her face with her hands. "Am I wrong? Could I have been mistaken? Oh,

Hugh, Hugh, if it were only as you say!" and she sat still puzzling and thinking.

Presently Bob and Hilda came in. "Hulloa, Izy! You don't look too good yet. What have you been saying to Hugh? He just passed me with his gun, and looked like a bear with a sore head."

"I think he is bilious," she answered quietly.

It was a long day for Isabel, for the others would not let her do anything. So she sat in an easy chair darning her brother's socks nearly all day. Hugh did not turn up till dinner-time, and then his bad humour had all worn off. He did not trouble Isabel again, just treated her as he did the rest. Her treatment of him, the change in her, was still a mystery to him, and the greatest disappointment he had ever known.

Gwen drove Justice Harwood in the dogcart up to the little schoolhouse to get the mail. When they got back and were having tea, Hilda got impatient to open the only letter that was for her.

"Oh, girls, just imagine! A friend of ours is coming up to Cunninghame the same day as we go. Tuesday, isn't it?" she asked.

"Well, I hope the friend has the manners to be a man, and young," said Gwen.

"You don't echo that wish, do you?" asked Hilda, turning to her brother.

"Don't know, I'm sure. Who is it?"

"Lallah Rencliffe," she answered.

"Lallah Rencliffe coming to the lakes?" and

Isabel, who watched him closely, saw him grow pale, but it was with annoyance at his sister's stupidity more than anything else. Had he not told her of his love for Isabel? But Hilda had completely forgotten for the moment. He noticed Isabel's look and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm simply indifferent; she might wait until she is asked," he answered snappishly.

"But she was. She is coming with Mrs. Mortimer. She is a friend of the Mortimers, Lucy," and Hilda went on reading.

Isabel saw that he was far from indifferent, and it confirmed all that she had heard. "What a coward he was, after all," she thought.

Next day Robert took his mother and their guests into town and the girls stayed home to prepare for their visit to the lakes.

"Look here, girls, you persist in making an invalid of me, although I am all right now, so I want you to tell me what you intend wearing at Cunninghame and I will fix it up for you."

"Oh, I don't know that I will take more than a blouse for the evening and wear my new costume up," answered Lucy,

"That's about all I mean to hamper myself with, too," chimed in Gwen.

"Humph!" said Isabel. "Well, I mean to wear my costume up, but I am going to take an evening dress and put one up for mother as well."

"What nonsense!" said Lucy.

"Perhaps it is, but I mean to do so all the same. Do you think you will feel comfortable in street attire and your friends in evening dress? Besides, we owe it to our guests to dress correctly."

"It's not like you to care what any one thinks, Izy; but perhaps we had better take a dress, although ours are shabby, and there's no time to make new ones."

"I will fix up what we have, Lucy; and please don't say anything to Hilda, just take them as a matter of course."

Isabel gave them a hug. She had won the day.

A black silk dress of her mother's, which had seen a few years' wear, she soon fixed to suit her taste, for they had given their mother a beautiful lace bertha for her last birthday and it just came in handy now. They had pretty ball dresses, but they were quite unsuitable, so Isabel took down two black silk muslin dresses which they had used for a concert two years before, but were little worn and were still handsome. She soon had sleeves put in and the necks filled in higher, and they looked smart dinner dresses. Gwen had a new go-out white dress which was just the thing. Isabel lost not a moment, and with some help from the girls had them completed before Hilda returned.

They were all in good spirits, even Hugh was brighter; after tea, however, he grew impatient and would not settle down to anything.

"Hugh, what's wrong? You are like a hen on hot griddles," asked Gwen.

"Am I, Gwen? Well, I'll challenge you to a game of chess and change your opinion," he answered.

They got the board and men and began at once, but he started at every sound. Presently the dogs began to bark and a horse came up at full gallop. Then Hugh smiled to himself and settled to the game.

It was Mick, immaculately attired in a new grey striped, bell-bottomed suit, with the coat cut very short, a red buttonhole and a blue tie, who swaggered in as though the place belonged to him. He stood at the door for a second, then strode over to Isabel and held out his arm.

"What is it, Mick?" she asked. He cast a withering look at the others, then slowly turned to her and held his arm almost in front of his face.

"I'm waiting," he said majestically. Isabel, who knew his peculiar ways, smilingly took his arm and began to limp out with him.

"Got the stringhalts?" he asked.

Isabel laughed heartily, and her mother had to explain.

Mick gave Hugh a contemptuous look. "Well, and by jingo! you're a nice johnnie to trust ladies with," and walked out with Isabel.

Mick had spoken to Hugh with gratitude only a week before, but then no mention of the Wal-

halla trip was made. On the Tuesday he had ridden over to the farm at great inconvenience to himself, and then heard for the first time of their trip; also, when he had questioned Paddy as to the method of their journey and found that Isabel and Hugh had ridden side by side, he felt a double grievance against him.

He took Isabel to the kitchen and placed two chairs. "Isabel, will yer be my wife?" he asked abruptly.

"No, Mick, I won't."

"I thought you'd say that," he answered dejectedly.

"You knew very well I would. Why don't you believe me, Mick?"

"I do believe yer, Isabel, but I do want yer so badly and I don't want that stuck-up to get yer."

"Mick, no stuck up or stuck down will get me. It is most likely that I will never marry at all."

"Isabel, do yer mean to say that you refused him?" asked Mick in astonishment.

"I most certainly would if he had asked me, but he has not done me that honour yet," she answered calmly.

"Do yer mean to day that he has not hinted at yer yet?"

"No, Mick, not even hinted," she said quietly.

"Well, I'll be jiggered. He's behaved well, after all; he said he wouldn't and by golly he was right. I believed him first, and then when you all

went off and didn't let on I thought he'd turned cocktail."

Isabel's face burned red. "Mick, what did he tell you? Tell me," she asked in agitation.

"Oh, nothin'. He just said he wouldn't," and Mick, who did not care to give himself away, changed the subject.

"Isabel, I'll always love yer as long as I live, and if you should ever change yer mind yer will find Mick and Old Emerald waitin' for yer."

"I thank you with all my heart, Mick. I will never change my mind. I hope all the same to hear of your marrying some nice girl before long."

"Thanks, I'm not havin' any. I think I'll conduct yer back to the others." But Isabel went to her room, and Mick walked straight up to Hugh and held out his hand and said quietly, "I thought, when yer sneaked her off to Walhallie, you were the meanest cuss alive, but I've jist found out that you're the clean potater after all, and I thank yer heartily. Your turn now. Good night."

Hugh sat there hardly gripping his meaning, but as soon as Mick went off he hurried after him.

"Mick, tell me, have you failed?"

"Yes. Your turn now, and yer deserve it," he answered.

Hugh took his hand. "I'm sorry for you, old man."

"Thanks, but I hope you'll not be sorry for yerself."

Hugh could not catch the rest of his sentence, for he was off full gallop.

Hugh searched the house for Isabel in vain, for she was in her own room trying to fathom what Mick meant. Had Hugh been confessing his engagement to Lallah and deploring that he could not ask her? "She fell asleep no wiser than she was when she began.

Sabbath morning again, but oh, what a great difference to Isabel! To her there was a void in everything, even to the beautiful hymn they sang. Hugh was lighthearted once more. His week of thralldom was over and he was free to speak.

Just as they were about to take breakfast he brought her a beautiful bunch of purple violets, wet with dew. She took them with a great show of indifference.

"Let me pin them in, Miss Isabel. Where is your little talisman?" he asked in surprise.

Isabel blushed. "I lost it in Walhalla—when I fell, I suppose."

They all looked at her. "And you never said a word about it; aren't you sorry?" asked Gwen.

"Yes, indeed, I am very sorry—some day I will go and try to find it."

"Was it valuable?" asked the Justice.

"It was a wee ivory cross which her father gave her years ago, and she has never let a day pass since without wearing it," her mother explained.

"Isabel, what about your luck now? You

always used to say something bad would happen when you lost that," said Lucy.

"I will wait for the bad days to come," she answered shortly; but she knew that they were upon her.

Hugh did not get a chance to speak to her alone that day, try as he would. She did not go to church, her excuse being to rest her foot, which was almost better. She was reading a book when Gwen rushed in ahead of the others to give her all the news.

"Oh, Izy, Mick Maccaffey was at church and I nearly died laughing at him. He went in ahead of us and sat near the end of the seat, with his new sewn-on-while-you-wait pants on and blue tie, and when the minister was just about to give out the hymn Mick strode up the aisle and tapped Hugh on the shoulder. 'I say, blokie, where's Isabel?' Hugh said something and Mick whispered something else to him, and oh, Izy, Hugh went as red as a turkey gobbler, and Mick went to his seat then. I tried to get it out of Hugh, but he won't tell me a word. Now, Izy, what could it have been?" and Gwen prattled on and on until the rest came in.

Gwen's talk made Isabel more and more careful to keep Hugh at arm's length. She felt that they were intriguing against her.

CHAPTER XIII

LALLAH RENCLIFFE

NEXT day Robert took Justice Harwood and Hugh to a big cattle sale in the next town and they returned late, and in the bustle and preparation for the morrow he found no opportunity for a private talk to Isabel. He comforted himself that he would find heaps of chances at the lakes.

Old Paddy came again to look after things, and they all drove off in a big wagonette, which held them comfortably in the three seats. They had some twenty miles or more to travel, but it was through good open country and almost perfect roads. They passed first through farming lands, and then the country opened out into rich grazing lands with herds of fat cattle and horses, and everywhere the grass green as emeralds and in abundance. As they neared Sale the country became more and more flat, with miles of well-grassed lands without a sign of tree or bush, and the sheep and little frisky lambs scattered all over the paddocks.

Sale is a flat, sleepy little town, but of some

importance in its way. They drove straight to the wharf, and then Robert and Hugh took the wagonette back to the nearest hotel. A small passenger steamer was anchored alongside the wharf in a dirty-looking little canal. A few loungers were about, and a man unloading empty fish baskets out of an evil-smelling wagonette was all there was to be seen. A wait of fifteen minutes, however, brought a change, during which time the girls succeeded in making their hair look presentable with the aid of the little mirror in a diminutive cabin.

The shrill shriek of a whistle announced the Melbourne train. Soon after a host of cabs came tearing along to the wharf, as though there was not a second to lose in this world. Townspeople were hurrying along in twos and threes, and all the available youngsters about the place came flocking down, to say nothing of half a dozen Celestials and black fellows. Amidst all the confusion Hilda recognized her friends alighting from a cab.

John Mortimer had come down from Cunninghame the night before, to meet his mother and of course Lucy; and the latter's happiness was a thing of completeness during her holiday.

Mrs. Mortimer was accompanied by Miss Lallah Rencliffe, a small-minded, small-waisted, pink and white bit of fashion, who showed undue haste in hurrying to meet Hugh.

Under cover of her umbrella Isabel watched them,

and, to her, Hugh seemed rather annoyed than pleased. Miss Rencliffe scrutinized the farm girls with a vulgar stare, and mentally calculated to have little to do with them. The steamer's whistle blew, and all went aboard. When the bell rang the visitors off, such hurry-scurrying and good-byes made one imagine that the boat was off for a year's cruise. Even when anchor was raised and they were off some of the young people and children ran beside the boat for a good way.

All along the banks of the river the ground was flat and swampy and covered with ti-tree, the cattle wading knee-deep in the swamps, eating the young tussocks. The river kept widening until you could hardly tell where you first entered the channel and lakes.

Every second confirmed Isabel's belief that Lallah Rencliffe could claim Hugh as her own. She hardly let him out of her sight, and apparently did as she liked with him. But in reality Hugh was detailing his visit to the farm with enthusiasm, and she wisely led him on as the only means to keep him by her side. She was far too penetrating not to see where his heart was leading him, and she determined to win him for herself. Isabel and Gwen would not deign to use the rugs, but paced about the upper deck talking to the skipper and mate, whom they knew, and apparently enjoying themselves to their hearts' content.

Dear little Gwen, with her wondrous eyes and

bright face, and her curls, damp with the moist air and clinging about her shoulders, "was a sight," as the skipper said, "to cure sore eyes." Isabel, in a dark blue costume, faultlessly made, her face flushed with the fresh breeze and excitement, was hardly less beautiful. She seemed to know every spot along the coast almost as well as the captain himself. Mrs. Mortimer was delighted listening to her, and Isabel made her see the beauty of the lakes almost as vividly as she saw them herself.

It is delightful travelling over the lakes in the springtime, for then the coastline is tinted with verdure, and when the breeze comes from land one gets the full sweetness of the heath and wild flowers.

Travelling from Sale you pass through the three lakes in succession—Victoria, Wellington and King. The former broadens out from the channel and is three miles in diameter, consequently one is not far from the coast at any time and can take in all the beauty of the white beach, sloping upward to meet the green herbage, which begins with the beach and stretches over the timbered hills. The tourist can catch a glimpse of the aboriginal station, away over a more barren hill than the others. Away the other side of the lake the white sandy beach loses itself in the ti-tree, which runs right through to meet the Ninety Mile Beach.

Lake Wellington is the largest of the three lakes, and is some ten miles across. The coastline is

merely a dark line with a gleam of white on the beach and the blue hills stretching away behind. The last, Lake King, is the finest from a picturesque point of view. Sometimes the little steamer will be detained on the upward trip to deliver empty fish baskets to the fishermen, who swarm the lake in little sailing boats, which look like graceful swans gliding about the silvery blue water. (That is, when the days are fine.) Hard, weather-beaten brave men, who are as much at home on the water as the swans themselves. The steamer put into the fishing village of Paynesville—a quaint little place, built right on the beach with the hills behind, and everywhere scattered about the beach, fish nets are drying or being mended. When the boat anchors there is quite a rush and bustle on the little pier. All the village folk who are not absolutely ill or detained in some way, either coming to meet the boat or watching from their own doors. Kindly, brown-faced people, who can give a shrewder guess at the passengers' character than those individuals give them credit for. They have anxiety at times, but on the whole lead happy, healthy lives.

From Paynesville the lake is very narrow across. One can catch glimpses of the sea through the strip of ti-tree, which becomes narrower as the lake nears the sea. To the left the scenery becomes more and more rugged and beautiful. The hills rise at the water's edge, sometimes almost over-

hanging the lake and casting great shadows over the water. Shortly after leaving Paynesville darkness set in, and the fishermen's lights could be seen gleaming on the shore, besides the beacon lights, every here and there, showing deep water. Right up on the steep hills the lights flickered from tourists' boarding houses, which were reached from the tiny landings by winding paths, which looked shady and sweet on a hot summer's day.

The boat stopped several times before it ran into the last narrow strip of lake, and it was late when it at last anchored at its destination. All manner of vehicles were awaiting passengers, the drivers shouting out their respective hotels. Robert got his party together and entered a drag for Maringibar House, nearly two miles further on. A big straggling old house, built on a high hill, with a strip of ti-tree at its foot and then the great open ocean.

As usual the house was crowded with visitors, and it was with difficulty that they could all be accommodated. Isabel fell asleep with the roar of the sea in her ears, and it was scarcely more than daylight when she called Gwen, and together they set off to the beach and were back, fresh and rosy after their plunge, before the household was properly astir. They sat on a bench on the hill-top, watching the bathers scampering down the hill, their towels slung carelessly across their shoulders, and disappearing into the dense ti-tree.

An old Scotch nurse, who had lived with the Rothsays for years, and nursed the four children in succession, lived only about half a mile away. Her husband was a seaman on one of the boats, plying between Cunninghame and Melbourne. She had been to stay with the Rothsays a few years ago and was very attached to them.

The two girls had an early breakfast and ran off to see her, Isabel thus escaping an encounter with Hugh and delighting their nurse beyond measure. She had no children of her own, and her love for Isabel and Gwen filled up a big gulf in her rather joyless life. She had married Fergus McLeod when she was on the high road to forty, after waiting for him since girlhood. He was only a few years her senior, a fine strapping Scotchman, who was wrecking his body and soul through drink, and at times making his wife's life a burden to her. She was a gentle-natured, placid old soul, who made all the children big and small love her. It was one of the worst punishments that could befall them when their parents would forbid a visit to Nurse Helen's little cottage. Everybody called her Nurse Helen.

When Hugh found that Isabel was not at the breakfast table, and learnt her whereabouts, he determined to take a walk in the direction of the cottage and intercept her; but he reckoned without his host, for Miss Rencliffe was just as determined that he should go in the opposite direction.

"Oh, Hugh," she cried, as he was leaving the breakfast table, "get your hat; we are all going down to the beach to gather shells."

"I will join you later," he answered.

"No, you must come now; later you might get reading a book and forget to come."

"No, I will not. I am going to fetch the girls now," he answered.

"Oh, Hugh, don't be so aggravating. The girls can find their own way all right, and there's such a lot of news I want to tell you," she said peevishly. "Besides, you will have heaps of time to talk to them when I am not here."

"Oh, very well; I will come then, but I will not stay long, for——"

She knew very well what he would have said, but policy forbade a remark. She merely got her hat and led him off, apparently quite unconscious that the others were not following. He was savage with her for beguiling him away when his heart led him elsewhere, and he answered at random, much to her chagrin.

"Oh, Hugh, how awfully boorish you have grown since you went to that outlandish hole!" she said vindictively, when he had frowned darkly and had made no comment to one of her empty speeches, which hitherto had drawn a gay response from him.

"Boorish, am I? well, perhaps you are right," and he gave her a good-natured smile which immediately raised her hopes and aspirations to regain

her old-time influence over him. But the charm would not work. It hurt him to remember those careless days and giddy whirl, and just this morning too, when so much hung in the balance. He could willingly have consigned her to perdition.

She was full of city gossip, some of which would have been a startler to him a few weeks ago ; but now he hardly caught some of it, he was busy thinking of Isabel's attitude to him.

" I don't believe you are listening to a word I say, sir," she said, after detailing a livelier piece of gossip still.

" Yes, I heard," he answered quietly ; " but I tell you what it is, Lallah, it doesn't interest me one peg, but I am sorry to hear you repeat it all the same."

She stood still and looked at him. " Merciful Heaven ! have they turned your head as well ? " she gasped in her astonishment at him.

" Nobody has turned my head that I'm aware of, unless it is in the right direction."

" You mean ? " she said maliciously.

" That I can't afford to throw stones," he answered seriously.

Her shrill peal of laughter rang out and reached the hillside when Gwen and Isabel were returning from a message they had taken for Nurse Helen.

" Pray excuse me laughing, Hugh, but really you are too absurd. Have they made a Methodist of you, or is it the Army you are qualifying for ? "

"Neither the one nor the other," he answered firmly, picking up shells and pelting them into the tiny dancing waves at his feet.

"Why, in pity's name, then, are you hiding your light under a bushel?" she asked.

"I haven't found the light yet, I'm sorry to say; but I'll tell you what I have found—nerve-soothing, brain-strengthening tonics in the sweet, quiet, healthy life of the country. This rest and quiet have been more than life-giving to me; it has made me see my old self as I was—an abominably selfish cad with no thought beyond the hour, and that for myself."

"And now?" she questioned.

"I do not know," he answered shortly, and walked on thinking, forgetful of her presence; nor did she remind him, for there was the walk back and possibly he might walk this mood off. One thing was evident, however, if she intended to be Mrs. Hugh Harwood she must exercise diplomacy. Presently he turned of his own accord and walked slowly back, and Lallah could get nothing but monosyllables from him to whatever subject she referred to.

Hugh got back to the house with his nerves on the rack, and went at once to find Isabel; but although he searched the house and surroundings he could not get a sight of her. Even Gwen was not visible until luncheon time, and then she appeared at the same time as the soup, bright and

rosy, and intimated to her mother that Isabel was taking lunch with Nurse Helen.

Hugh decided to call and make Nurse Helen's acquaintance after lunch. Isabel, however, had anticipated such a likelihood, and as Nurse Helen had given her an early luncheon, she escaped back to her room before the others had finished theirs.

It seemed as though Hugh would never get a word in private with her. He found Nurse Helen quietly dozing in her chair, with her hand on an open Bible which she had been reading. He watched the dear old face for a few minutes and then knocked gently.

Nurse Helen started up. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, raising his hat, "but are you Nurse Helen?"

She inclined her head.

"Then I am Miss Isabel's friend; is she here?" he asked pleasantly.

"A friend of Isabel's! then you are thrice welcome," and she came to the door with outstretched hand. "Maybe you are the Justice's son?" she asked.

"Yes, I am Hugh Harwood."

"I am glad to meet ye, and my dearie will be sorry that she has missed ye," she said.

"I am sorry too, indeed—er—has she spoken of me—us, I mean?" he asked, trying to fathom Isabel's confidence.

“Aye, she did that—she never forgets that Nurse Helen likes to hear all her good news.”

“I am sure it delights her equally to have you listen,” Hugh answered.

“Aye, they are all bonny, but she’s my dearie, Mr. Harwood. Ye won’t get to know her as easily as the rest; she’s shy of strangers; but when ye do, ye won’t wonder at me.”

“I don’t wonder now,” he answered, but with such a look that Nurse Helen read his heart, and reading it, made up her mind to take his part. He was so interested in the old lady’s conversation that he lost count of the time. It was all Isabel, Isabel, Isabel—her babyhood, her childhood, her cleverness, her sweetness; enough to weary anybody else but Hugh. He, however, encouraged her by every artifice in his power. Indeed when he at last made up his mind to depart, he and Nurse Helen had forsworn to be cronies for life.

CHAPTER XIV

“ SKRIMPO ”

IT was an easy thing for Isabel to repair her morning's neglect to her friends, now that Hugh was absent, and she did it thoroughly.

Hilda could not understand her, and she was beginning to want to very much ; Isabel was everything that could be desired, and yet Hilda felt that she was kept at arm's length. Like Hugh, she appreciated the Rothsays' character much better since meeting Lallah Rencliffe again. Already Hilda was repenting her invitation to Lallah, but it had to be gone through now and she must make the best of it.

That young lady was in a very disagreeable mood. She could not find Hugh, she could not coax Mrs. Mortimer from Mrs. Rothsay's side, Hilda was with Bob, and Gwen was teasing John Mortimer and Lucy, so out of pure vindictiveness she set to work on Isabel.

Isabel, seeing her mood, strengthened her armour and gave her back blow for blow, although none but Lallah could perceive that they were intended for blows.

That a “ mere farm girl ” should be capable of dealing with what she meant should crush her out of Hilda’s set at least, was “ simply audacity itself.” A farm girl with such calm dignity was entirely outside her experience.

When the dressing bell went for dinner, she linked her arm in Hilda’s and led her off to the room which they occupied together.

“ What are you going to wear, Hilda dear ? ” she asked, seating herself on the bed.

“ Oh, I don’t know ; I suppose the plainest thing I’ve got in my trunk.”

“ Hilda Harwood ! what’s come over you ? ”

Hilda blushed. “ Well, I suspect our hostess and the girls have not brought an evening dress, so of course we must dress accordingly.”

“ Trash ! our hostess ! farm hands, you mean ? What are they to do with our set ? For my part I mean to show them how a lady should dress.”

“ You would do well,” answered Hilda quietly. “ I trust they will profit by it.”

“ What do you mean ? ” Lallah snapped.

Hilda looked her straight in the eyes. “ I mean, Lallah, that when you meet a true lady, dress is at a discount. I also mean that if you mean to retain my friendship, you must speak of my friends with respect ; ” and Hilda undid her trunk and selected the identical blue gown which was Robert’s favourite.

Lallah looked horrified at the much-worn gar-

ment, and opened her trunk and took out a gown of rich and shimmering material, more suitable for a state ball than a quiet dinner served up in a public room.

As they passed out from their room they encountered Lucy and Gwen coming from theirs, and Hilda's face flushed with pleasure on seeing the change they had effected in their toilet. Looking from their quiet, ladylike and appropriate gowns to the bit of frivolity at her side, she was thankful that her eyes had been opened.

All eyes turned from the large, long public table as they entered and took their places at a smaller table, on the opposite side of the big room, and they continued to stare throughout the meal, as was small wonder. Perhaps some of the country people had never seen such a costume outside Worth's circus. Lallah in her bright yellow silk dress, cut low and sleeveless, with quantities of rich lace about it, and a diamond star glittering on her breast.

Poor Hilda was outraged ; she could see plainly that her father and brother were scandalized, and she felt herself to blame.

Isabel and her mother came in after the others were seated. As they came in a murmur ran through the room, which Lallah felt was directed against herself. "How dare farm people dress like that ! Ignorance," she said to herself. But even she knew, although she would not admit it to herself, that

mother and daughter looked perfect ladies. Isabel, quietly dressed in her simple black muslin, with soft creamy lace at her throat, and a bunch of violets, which Nurse Helen had given her, nestling on her breast, piloting her mother into the room.

Yes, she knew they were ladies, but how? A freak of nature, probably, but she should show them their place after dinner.

Hugh's whole face lighted up as he watched Isabel and returned her pleasant little bow and smile.

“ John Mortimer, where's that friend of yours ? ” asked Gwen.

“ Oh, did I not tell you, Gwen ? He has run down to Barnsdale for a day or so,” John answered.

“ H'm ! pretty considerate of him, I'm sure, when he might have known I was coming,” Gwen said with a shake of her saucy head.

“ But really, Gwen, I am not sure that he did know you were coming. I do not think that I mentioned your name particularly.’

“ Then I don't think I'll have you for a brother-in-law at all, if that's all the interest you mean to take in me,” answered Gwen, pretending to pout.

“ Oh, come now, Gwen, that's unfair. I'll tell you what—I'm awfully sorry that I neglected to tell Skrimpo about you, but to compromise matters I will introduce you first of all,” said John in a serio-comic tone.

"John, is that really his name—Skrimpo?" asked Gwen.

"His name is Harold Anderson, Gwen, but we used to call him Skimpy at school, because his coats were always a foot too short, and from Skimpy it turned to Skrimpo, and there it stuck amongst his friends," answered John.

"Then if he is half as nice as his name, he will be Skrimpo to me too," said Gwen.

"Is that Anderson the lawyer you are talking about?" asked Justice Harwood.

"Yes."

"A very clever fellow too," the Justice commented.

"Clever! well, if his dress is any indication——" began Lallah.

"I would be sorry to measure his brains by the cut of his coat," he answered, giving her a direct look.

Lallah reddened and appealed to Hugh. "Now, Hugh, would you expect many clients if you dressed like him?" she asked.

"If I had brains like his, Lallah, it wouldn't trouble me in the least what I wore. It is only when there is a limit to our mental capacity that we over-indulge the other parts of our bodies to counterbalance it."

Lallah bit her lip with annoyance, and vowed to make him suffer.

"Gwen, my dear, I hope you will not turn your

back on poor old Skrimpo because of what they say,” asked John.

“He is mine till death,” said Gwen in mock dignity.

Lallah watched Isabel’s every turn, guardedly, jealously. She could not understand her one whit. While Hugh was almost devouring her every word and action, Isabel merely treated him as she did the others, nothing more. Most certainly there was some deep trick in it, for no farm girl could dream of repelling Hugh Harwood’s advances.

Afterwards, in the sitting-room, John introduced half a dozen acquaintances to them. One, a Doctor Mackintosh, had taken a seat near Lallah Rencliffe.

“What a strikingly handsome family!” he remarked to her.

“Do you mean the Rothsays?” she asked.

“Yes, and I seem to remember the name and their faces as well.”

“I fancy you would hardly meet them in your set, doctor. I doubt indeed if they ever leave their farm to get as far as the city,” she said spitefully.

“Farm! Is there a brother Bob?”

“Yes,” she answered in surprise, “at Hilda Harwood’s side.”

In three strides Doctor Mackintosh was wringing Bob’s hand.

“Bob, old chap, I wondered where you had buried yourself all these years.”

“By jove! Sam Mackintosh! I really didn’t

recognize such a handle to your name," laughed Bob. "Mother, this is an old schoolmate that I used to tell you about. Girls, do you remember me inviting Mackintosh and a couple of other fellows round to your hotel when you were in town once?"

"I remember," said Dr. Mackintosh. "I have never forgotten your sister's singing. Where is she?"

"Here they are—Isabel and Lucy."

"Lucy?" exclaimed the doctor. "By all that's wonderful! John Mortimer's fiancée. What a small world this is, after all."

At which his friend John Mortimer looked roguish. "Gwen," he whispered, "shall I introduce you?"

"No thanks, John. I'm waiting for Skrimpo."

Lallah Rencliffe was looking very disconsolate, for the only other man in the room besides Hugh who was worth talking to in her estimation, was sitting beside Isabel in earnest conversation, and Hugh himself was not so much as looking at her; and now half a dozen were urging Isabel to sing. As she was rising to go to the piano, a stable boy stood in the open doorway and knocked. "A telegram for Mr. Graham."

That gentleman took it, and the boy was passing out when Isabel caught sight of his face. "Jake, is that you? How are you?" and she gave him a friendly handshake, in the doorway, in sight of them all. Poor Jake went red to the crown of

his tousy head, but it was a genuine look and happy smile that he gave her.

“ Thank you kindly, miss, but I’m well, and I wish I was back on the farm again,” he said in one breath.

“ Look here, Jake, and so do I,” said Gwen, coming up and shaking hands too. “ Old Brindle has never been ridden since you left the place, and she kicks Bob every time he milks her.”

“ I will speak to Robert whenever we want a boy again, Jake. I am going to sing now. Good night.”

“ Good night, miss, and I will get the coachman and boys to come around and listen if you’re going to sing,” and he went off.

Two weeks ago the Harwoods would have been considerably astonished, but now they took it as just the right thing. Indeed, Hilda was half wishing that Robert would make much of the boy as well. So inconsistent does love make us.

As for Lallah, she was horrified. “ Are you going to sing ‘ Polly, the cows are in the corn ? ’ ” she asked witheringly, as Isabel passed her chair.

“ Why ? is it a favourite of yours ? ” Isabel asked with a smile.

“ Oh dear no, but I thought it appropriate.”

“ Ah ! I thought that ‘ Stepping Stones ’ would be more appropriate,” Isabel answered pleasantly. At which Justice Harwood laughed until he shook.

Isabel did sing a Scotch song, but it was Jessie’s

dream. When she had finished, the doors and windows, passages and veranda were quite full of listeners, who clapped and encored until she felt inclined to run ; but catching sight of Lallah Rencliff's face, her pride upheld her. Every man in the room was on his feet in an instant offering her a seat.

" Isabel, is this the outcome of my faithful training ? " asked Gwen. " Are you intending to seat yourself without making your bows ? "

" Gwen, you are a perfect clown," answered Isabel with a smile, and she conversed easily and naturally with Dr. Mackintosh, as though she had not just stirred up a whole houseful of people with her song.

Lallah Rencliffe sat frozen, wondering if after all she was not the victim of some plot. Isabel masquerading as a farm girl, and in reality a very princess, as indeed she looked.

Now Hugh was pleading at her side for another song. " Isabel, don't disappoint them ; sing another song."

" There need be no disappointment. There are so many to sing here," she answered coldly.

" Oh, do sing ! do sing ! " came from all over the room, until she was forced to submit. Swiftly she crossed to the piano and began " Polly, the cows are in the corn," to Miss Rencliffe's discomfiture.

It was an old favourite of Isabel's, and one which

her teacher had taken particular pains with. She was in good voice, and was glad of it. It was seemly her one weapon of defence against Miss Rencliffe, and she meant to use it. Loud and clear came the call, “ Polly ! Polly ! the cows are in the corn. Polly ! Polly ! the cows are in the corn.” She half turned each time and looked at Lallah.

As she finished, Dr. Mackintosh stepped forward, while Hugh sat dreaming.

“ Miss Rothsay, I cannot thank you enough for the pleasure you have given me. You sing divinely. I have never heard anything like your voice before ; have you ? ” he asked, turning to Miss Rencliffe.

“ Never,” she answered, before she thought of what she was saying.

That was a chance for Hugh and he gripped it. Coming over to her, he said, “ I am glad you like her singing so much, Lallah ; isn’t it perfect ? ”

“ Did I say I liked it ? ” she asked defiantly. “ If you wish to know my opinion, she is a conceited hussy,” she added *sotto voce*, and between mortification and jealousy, she flounced out of the room.

“ Spiteful little vixen ! ” muttered Hugh.

“ Me ? ” asked Gwen, with her eyes wide open.

“ You ! No, Gwen ; you’re worth fifty dozen of her,” he answered.

“ But, Hugh, I thought—lean down and I’ll whisper—I thought you were ‘ rats ’ on her, Hugh ? ”

Hugh blushed and smiled. “ Who put that in

your head, Gwen? I'll tell you the truth: I detest her to-night. There is only one I love," and his eyes rested on Isabel.

Gwen's eyes filled with tears, and she patted his hand. She knew how hard it would be to bring Isabel around.

"Hugh Harwood! and before everybody, too," said a deep voice from the doorway, and all turned to behold a great broad-shouldered, curly-headed cyclist, splashed from head to foot in mud, filling up the doorway.

"Skrimpo!" Gwen sang out without any more ado.

To say that Skrimpo looked astonished was the least one could say.

"Gwen, I am shocked at you," her mother said sternly.

"I beg your pardon, mother—but he is Skrimpo; even he can't deny the fact," she answered.

Skrimpo burst out laughing, and came to Gwen with his hand outstretched.

"Hugh, you must present me."

"Mr. Harold Anderson, barrister-at-law; Miss Gwen Rothsay, lady," was Hugh's introduction.

Skrimpo took her hand in his broad one and looked laughingly into her dancing eyes.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked innocently.

"No, I am glad. Who told you about my skimpy coats, Miss Gwen?"

“ Oh,” stammered Gwen, “ nobody—at least, John, but he didn’t quite say that—and you know you did—you must have grown at a tremendous rate.”

Mr. Harold Anderson looked down at the sweet bright face, far below him, and breathed inwardly, “ The devil ! I’m kotched.”

CHAPTER XV

FERGUS McLEOD

ISABEL had slipped out into the cool night air shortly after her song, where the whole world seemed to be filled up with the roar of the ocean. Somebody passed her hurriedly, then stopped. "Is there a doctor staying here?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, Dr. Mackintosh; is any one ill?" she answered.

"Yes, miss. Nurse Helen's man has had an accident."

"See, that is Dr. Mackintosh just inside the door there; beckon him when he looks," and Isabel sped off as she was to Nurse Helen's.

She ran swiftly through the ti-tree, never stopping until she reached the cottage door. Quite a little crowd was about the door, in sympathy for Nurse Helen.

"Oh, my dearie, you've come!" she said, and drew Isabel into the room, where Fergus McLeod lay ghastly on the bed. The local quack was with him, vainly endeavouring to bandage his head; but

Fergus would have none of him, for he was still half dazed with drink.

One of the fishermen who helped carry him home told Isabel that "he was a-doin' monkey tricks on the balcony of the *Fisherman's Arms* when he—ar—sprung a leak and sunk, miss, right down to ther pavement."

"Oot, ye devil; oot wi' ye!" Fergus shouted at the quack, then catching sight of Isabel as she came in he started. "Who in the name of Thunder is the lassie?" he asked.

"It's Isabel Rothsay, Fergus. Don't you remember me?" she asked.

"Aye, no doot, no doot. Send that devil oot," he cried, as the quack made an effort once more to affix the bandages.

"No, Fergus," she answered firmly, "you must let him attend to your poor head; you know you have had a nasty fall and you must be bandaged at once."

Fergus stared blankly. "If ye are set on it, ye can bandage me yersel'; but if that halkin' bumble-foot dares to come wi' in a foot o' me it will no be any more that is left o' him. Oot, ye devil!" he roared.

Isabel turned to the man, a red-nosed, shaky-looking individual.

"Doctor, perhaps you had better tell me what to do, for we are losing precious time."

"Ye-es; my dear young lady, yes indeed. That

ungrateful old wretch seems to—er—rather object to be attended to—e-r-r——”

“Don’t ye dare open yer dirty mouth to ther lassie. Oot wi’ ye!” Fergus made a drunken lurch out of bed and fell headlong on the floor.

The “doctor” took advantage of Isabel’s confusion to help himself from a flask of brandy lying on the dressing-table.

“Doctor, if you will kindly leave the room I am sure Nurse Helen will be very much obliged to you,” Isabel said sternly when she saw him at the flask.

“H’m! a pretty time of the night to call a man out of his bed to treat him like this!” he grumbled, snatching up his hat.

When he had gone Isabel got Nurse Helen and a young fisherman, and together they contrived to get Fergus back to bed. Then turning back the lace from her sleeves, she began to wash and bandage the poor cut head. Fergus didn’t make a murmur, but quietly watched her. He was not the only one who was watching—Dr. Mackintosh stood at the door and watched too, with his heart kindling with a new emotion. Isabel, so unconscious of self, with her beautiful face full of human pity and sympathy, bending over the poor distorted features and gently cutting away the hair and washing the wounds—her sleeves turned back, showing her strong, pretty arms, past the elbow. A less kindly man than Doctor Mackintosh might have been

touched by so perfect a picture of the ideal woman, but a glance at Fergus McLeod's face told him that there was no time to lose on sentiment.

He came quietly over to the bedside and took the sponge out of her hand.

Fergus moved suddenly. "It's all right, Fergus ; this is my friend, and he will soon make you comfortable," Isabel said soothingly.

The doctor finished the bandaging and sent the women from the room, while with the fisherman's help he got Fergus between the clean sheets. Isabel sent word to her mother that she would be remaining the night. Dr. Mackintosh came out to her. "Miss Rothsay, I will stay the night here. There is likely to be trouble with McLeod ; he is comfortable now because his senses are numbed, but it will only last a while longer. I'd better take you back while he is quiet."

"I have already sent mother word that I am remaining all night with Nurse Helen," answered Isabel.

"But, Miss Rothsay, I cannot permit it. McLeod will very likely be crazy with pain, and you could not possibly witness what is likely to follow such cases ; and your mother——"

"Doctor," said Isabel, stopping him, "mother will be quite pleased for me to stay with my dear old nurse, and I mean to stay ; besides, I am quite used to nursing, and you will no doubt find me useful," she added smilingly.

"No doubt I shall," he answered with meaning.

Nurse Helen was hovering around with an anxious face. The doctor laid his hand on her shoulder. "Your man has had a nasty shaking, Nurse Helen, and it will be a pretty tough fight, but he has a sound constitution, and we will do our best."

Her eyes filled with tears. "It was good of you to come to us so quickly."

"Oh, that's my work, and I enjoy helping people out of the scrapes they get into," he answered pleasantly.

A savage curse from the bedroom made them hurry in. They found Fergus trying his best to tear the bandages off. Isabel held his hands while the doctor readjusted them, with Fergus cursing all the while. When he was fixed up all right again she would have let his hands go, but he clutched hers tightly in his own.

"Bide a wee, lassie, bide a wee," he said slowly, and she sat beside him and kept his big tanned hands in hers.

When he dozed off the doctor beckoned Isabel out of the room. "I will have to ask you to watch him for half an hour, Miss Rothsay. I must go back to my room and get some medicine. He will be in high fever before the morning and we must be prepared. His poor old wife looks broken," he added as his eyes lit on her bent form, rocking backwards and forwards over the kitchen fire.

“ She seems almost paralysed with the shock ; her fond old heart will be broken if anything happens to Fergus. Doctor, couldn't you set her to do something that will occupy her mind ? ”

“ Oh, yes, there will be plenty to do,” he answered with a smile, and straightway he set Nurse Helen bustling about to see if she could procure a chicken from the roost, to make Fergus some gravy.

Isabel tip-toed back to the room, just in time, for she found Fergus sitting up in bed and staring wildly about him. Isabel hurried to the bed, but Fergus was too quick : with one bound he was out of bed.

“ Oh, Fergus, you must go back to bed. Whatever will the doctor say ! ” cried Isabel in alarm.

“ The devil to the doctor ! ” shouted Fergus, as he made a dart at the brandy flask and put it to his lips. Fortunately it did not contain much, for he had drained it before Isabel could think what to do. She managed to coax him back to bed, after a great deal of persuasion ; but no sooner had she got him safely tucked in than he began shouting to Nurse Helen to bring more brandy.

Isabel sat beside him and tried to coax him back to quietness, but he would not be silenced. Like a flash it struck her to sing to him, and she began very softly to sing “ Comin' thro' the Rye,” which she knew was his favourite song. No sooner did she begin than Fergus lay still, watching her. The unusual sound of singing in the sick-room made

Nurse Helen hurry in, where she stood with her arms akimbo, listening to her bairn.

When Isabel had sung it through, Fergus caught her hand. "Sing 'Bonnie Scotland,' lassie?" he asked her.

Isabel noticed, as she began to sing it, that he was getting restless and apparently feeling the pain more acutely. He was twisting about with muttered curses and groans. She sang on, one old Scotch song after the other, modulating her voice as he became quieter, until she was only humming and crooning over him like a mother to her infant.

Quietly he fell asleep, still clasping her hands, and it was so that Dr. Mackintosh found them on his return. She signed to him with her eyes for silence. She dare not move lest Fergus would waken.

The doctor went into the wee sitting-room and returned with a cushion, which he placed gently behind her back, then brought a mat from in front of the washstand and placed beneath her feet, left the room and presently returned with one of Nurse Helen's shawls and gently placed it about her shoulders. Then he went out to Nurse Helen, and between them they made a cup of strong coffee and spread some scone and butter. He carried a tray in and placed it on a small table beside her.

Isabel smilingly wondered how she was going to drink while her hands were locked in Fergus's, but the doctor solved the difficulty. He held the coffee and the scone, alternately, to her lips, while

she ate and drank, until not a vestige of either was visible ; then, with an approving nod, he went out to take his own refreshment and persuade Nurse Helen to do likewise.

It was a long, weary night to the two watchers. The doctor made Nurse Helen promise to lie down on the kitchen couch, after she had taken the brandy which he had poured in her coffee, promising to wake her if she was needed. The poor old lady was exhausted, and soon fell asleep. The doctor's big heart was touched as he looked at the gentle-faced old body, and thought that more than likely a deep sorrow awaited her at a close proximity. From her, his eyes travelled to the young girl sitting so still : not a movement. There she sat perfectly rigid, sacrificing herself that an old man might be spared the pain of suffering.

In his busy life and love of his own profession there had been little time to bestow on women, and less inclination. At the time he had met Robert Rothsay's sister, he had been full of dreams of a future acquaintance ; but as time wore on and his work became more absorbing those day-dreams passed, and only occasionally, when he heard a good voice, would his mind revert to Bob's sister, and he would wonder where she was ; but now to be actually sitting in the room with her ! To him it smacked of fatality. It would not be his fault, he told himself, if he did not cultivate her society now the opportunity was thrown in his way. He

would have gone a step farther in his imagination had he time to spend on his own thoughts, but he was beginning to get anxious on his patient's account. He had expected fever and concussion to follow such an accident, but now he saw worse symptoms showing. Paralysis was what he feared ever since Fergus had slept. He drew a chair beside Isabel and watched. He would have insisted on her changing her cramped position, but that he saw just what was happening now. The poor strong hands were slowly falling away from Isabel's of their own accord, to her amazement. The doctor shook his head at her and said nothing. In a very short space of time she was able to stretch out her tired arms and move her position, for the great tanned hands of Fergus lay motionless on the counterpane, where they had fallen apart from hers.

Isabel watched with fear and laid her hand on the doctor's arm. She thought that Fergus was dying. The doctor reassured her silently, and when she looked back at Fergus again she found his eyes fixed on hers with such a pleading, anxious look that tears filled her own and she stroked his arm.

"Don't ye fret yoursel', lassie. It was me own doin'," he said in a strange hollow voice, but quite clearly. Then his eyes wandered about the room in search of somebody.

"Nurse Helen is resting, Fergus," said Isabel, answering his look. "Shall I call her?"

"Na, na, lassie, do not call the puir body. I've given her enough trouble, ye kin. It wasna me, it was a' that cursed drink that made me the beast I was. I can see mesel' now the unclean body I was, when it's too late."

"But, Fergus, it is not too late; there will be lots of happy days in store for you and Nurse Helen yet," said Isabel innocently.

Doctor Mackintosh tried to give her a warning glance, but it was Fergus himself who caught it. "The doctor, he kins, lassie, and I kin too. I've had a most awfu' dream the night and I'm verra thankfu', for it would ha' been verra' bad to be taken the beast I was."

"Oh, Fergus, you must try to believe you will get well soon," cried Isabel.

"Doctor, ye jist tell the lassie what's gang wrong wi' me," asked Fergus languidly.

"Miss Rothsay, I am afraid we are neglecting our patient. He is weak; you will find some chicken broth on the stove: just bring a little here, will you?" answered the doctor discreetly.

"I'm afraid what you say is true, McLeod. Tell me exactly how you feel now," he said as Isabel quitted the room.

"Me brain is the only part o' the gear that will work now, doctor, and I'm afeered that I'm aboot clean done for," Fergus said sadly. The doctor turned the key and came back to the bedside and thoroughly examined Fergus. Gently and search-

ingly he looked over the poor stiff limbs and body. When he had finished he rearranged the bedclothes and looked down at Fergus with a world of sympathy in his grey eyes.

"Aye, doctor, I can see by the looks of ye that ma time is verra near. Speak oot, man; I'm no afraid to hear ye noo."

"No, no, McLeod; you must not jump at conclusions like that. It is just likely that I'm mistaken, but I should say that although you will be helplessly paralysed, still I see no reason why you should not live for many a long year yet," the doctor answered more cheerfully.

"Aye, mon, I wouldna care to live at a' if I am to be a helpless burden on Helen."

"But you would not be entirely helpless, McLeod. Your lower limbs certainly will be, but it is probable that the upper part of your body will only be semi-paralysed; in that case, of course, you could do lots to help your wife," said the doctor to cheer him up as he opened the door for Isabel.

Fergus drank the broth and soon after fell asleep, and was still sleeping when Doctor Mackintosh took Isabel home at daybreak.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LEGACY

HUGH did not hear of the accident until some time after Isabel had gone to the cottage, and then he followed immediately. As he neared the cottage, he heard her singing softly to Fergus. His heart throbbed wildly, for the blind of the sick man's room was up and the curtain had caught back, and Hugh could plainly see Isabel sitting holding Fergus's hand. He went to the kitchen door and saw Nurse Helen plucking a chicken. She turned at his footsteps and Hugh took her hand. "Can I do anything?" he whispered.

"No, sir, nothing that I can think of. My bairn is here; bless her!" she whispered back.

"I will call early in the morning; perhaps I will be in the way now," he said, with a silent squeeze of her hand. He could not go without one more look at Isabel, so went and stood in a little clump of ti-tree not far away, and watched.

Presently Doctor Mackintosh came into the house. Hugh saw him go out for the cushion and

place it behind her, and put the mat beneath her feet, and lastly the shawl, which the doctor placed so carefully and, to Hugh's excited jealousy, so tenderly about her shoulders. He stood rooted to the spot. It was his right, he told himself—his and only his right—to offer her such attentions, and yet his better sense answered that it was only common courtesy on the doctor's part, which he might offer to Nurse Helen herself.

By and by Doctor Mackintosh came in and fed Isabel with the coffee and scone. Hugh clenched his hands and strode back to his bed. He decided to speak his heart on the morrow, at the very first opportunity.

“Good morning, Miss Gwen. I believe we are first at the table,” laughed Skrimpo as he sauntered into the room.

“Good morning, Skrimpo. I hope you're as hungry as I am?” Gwen answered brightly.

“By the way, Miss Gwen, I'm sorry but I really did not catch your surname last night,” he said.

“Rothsay. Gwen Rothsay, grown-up lady,” she said with dignity.

“Rothsay! A very striking name,” he answered with knit brows. “By Jove! I really believe it's the same——”

“What's the same?” asked Gwen.

“Oh—er—just something I read the other day. I kept a clipping; excuse me, I will go and hunt it up.”

"Now that's too bad of Skrimpo altogether. Just when I get about the only chance I'm likely to get to have him all to myself, he runs off," said Gwen to herself.

Skrimpo was so long away that the rest of the party had almost finished their breakfast before he returned, and when he did, to Gwen's great indignation, he did not vouch a word on the subject.

"The next time that you run away from a young lady to find a clipping I hope you'll be fortunate enough to find it," Gwen said severely.

"I've found it; but, Miss Gwen, you'll have to exercise patience, until after breakfast, to see it. It's strictly private."

"Just for me to see?" asked Gwen childishly.

Skrimpo laughed. "Yes, you first of all. It depends on the others' behaviour whether we let them into the know or not."

"Well, sir, just you hurry, for curiosity is devouring me."

"If it's devouring you anything like the rate you are that curry, I'll not answer for the length of time you'll last," laughed Bob, for Gwen was eating at terrific speed, unconsciously acting for Skrimpo.

Isabel was sleeping and Hugh was just coming to breakfast, heavy-eyed and pale, as the others were leaving the room.

"Now, Miss Gwen, your curiosity may be satisfied," said Skrimpo, handing her the clipping. She

took it laughingly, but presently she wrinkled up her brows and grew fearfully wise-looking.

"Oh, Skrimpo, it's true, it's true! That was my father."

"What is it, child?" asked her mother, coming up.

"Oh, mother—Bob, Lucy, every one of you—oh, such news!" cried Gwen excitedly as they gathered about her.

"Come in here and I will read it out," suggested Skrimpo, going into a small sitting-room. He took it from Gwen and read:—

"Robert St. John Rothsay, only son of Robert St. John Rothsay, Esq., of Felton Grove, Wiltshire, England, who left England in the year 1879 for Australia, or his heirs, are sought by the executors of the will of the late Florence Rothsay. Anybody knowing his or their whereabouts, please communicate with Simmons & Noble, Barristers-at-law, Lincoln's Inn, London."

Tears stood in Mrs. Rothsay's eyes. "After all these years!" was all she said. But the others stayed and discussed the great news with Skrimpo, who finally went off to cable to Simmons & Noble.

They were all so excited that nobody thought to tell Hugh, and he went off to Nurse Helen's none the wiser and did not return until nearly luncheon time. On his way back he met Isabel on her way

to the cottage, looking perplexed and tired, for her mother had just told her of Skrimpo's clipping and the probable change that it might effect in their mode of living. It hurt the girl's sensitive nature to think of what the change might mean to them all.

"The very person I most wished to see, Miss Isabel," said Hugh, hastening to meet her with outstretched hand.

Isabel tried to avoid taking his hand and some of the brightness left his face.

"Why? Is Fergus worse, Mr. Harwood?"

"Fergus? No, he is all right, and is suffering no pain whatever now. It was for yourself that I wished to speak to you. Isabel, please do not grudge me a few minutes of your time now; my life's whole happiness depends on it."

Her face stiffened, but he would not notice it now.

"Isabel, I love you; be my wife; do with my life what you will, but oh, Isabel, my darling, give me your love," he cried passionately, holding her hand.

She was pale as death. "Mr. Harwood, what you ask is impossible. I will never marry. I mean to wed my life to my profession. As you have no doubt heard of the change in our position, you will understand that in all probability I can fulfil my desires now."

"But, Isabel, what is fame? What does it count against love? Marry me, dear, and I will promise

never to stand in the way of your ambition. Isabel, think ; do not give me an answer now if you cannot decide ; take time. I will not even see you if you do not wish it, but do not turn me away."

" Mr. Harwood, you must forgive me if I ever led you to believe that I cared for you."

She was white and her limbs were shaking.

" Isabel, is this your final answer ? Can you give me no hope ? I will wait for years if need be, if I might gain you in the end."

She shook her head. " My answer is final, Mr. Harwood."

" Isabel, is there any one else ? " Hugh asked hoarsely.

" No one else, neither will there be," she answered faintly, for she was trembling violently.

" Forgive me, dear, for worrying you. I will love you always, to the end. If you should ever need a friend, remember me. Good-bye, my dear love," and Hugh bent over her hand and kissed it, his face drawn and haggard—and was gone.

Isabel turned her steps down through the ti-tree and scrub, until she was hidden from view, and then threw herself down on the ground and gave way to passionate grief.

After a time (it seemed to her to be half a lifetime, and that she had buried all her loved ones in the meantime) she got up stiffly, shook out her dress and bathed her face in a wee pool, which was fringed in spring flowers and yellow buttercups,

then when she had dabbled them dry on her handkerchief, she took herself off to Nurse Helen's.

"Aye, my dearie, but you do look weary," Nurse Helen said on seeing her.

"I have a headache, Nurse Helen. I think that accounts for it. How is Fergus?"

"Much better than I ever expected, dearie, and he is looking for you," she answered.

"I see you are just making lunch, so I will eat something before I go to him. I do feel a bit peckish," said Isabel, ever practical, knowing in her heart that she could not face Fergus, faint and heart-sore as she was. Afterwards she sat with him until Gwen came to relieve her.

"Oh, Izy!" whispered that young lady to Isabel as she was leaving the cottage door. "Izy, isn't Skrimpo just splendid? Have you ever met any one just as nice as he is—aye, Isabel, have you just?"

Isabel leaned over and kissed the dear bright face.

"You dear little sunshiny thing! You mustn't let yourself fall in love with any one yet awhile, nice or nasty," she said, stroking Gwen's short curls.

"But, Izy, isn't he fine? Do you like him? I want you to like him very much."

"Yes, dear, I think I like him. I've hardly seen him yet; but why do you want me to like him?" she asked.

"Because, because"—and Gwen pulled Isabel's head down to her shoulder—"you won't tell any-

body, will you, Izy?—well, because I love him and I'm going to be Mrs. Skrimpo," she whispered.

Her sister turned pale. "Gwen, Gwen, he has surely never asked you yet?"

Isabel instantly jumped to the conclusion that his motives were mercenary on account of the legacy, but Gwen speedily relieved her mind.

"Oh, dear no, but I know he will when he knows me better. You see, I love him, so he must love me because of that," was her childlike answer.

Isabel gave her a kiss and went off. She determined to save Gwen from her own fate if possible, and although her own heart was near to breaking, she took the first opportunity of talking with Mr. Harold Anderson (having first ascertained that Miss Rencliffe had kept her room nearly the whole day, thinking, most probably, that Hugh was sleeping. She could not gather from any one where he was: "Off fishing," some of them said).

"She is such a child," Isabel explained to Skrimpo, concerning Gwen, "such a dear bright thing and full of innocent frolic, that I am afraid for her."

"Afraid for her?" he asked, puzzled.

"Yes, afraid that in her perfect innocence of men and their ways she might be tempted to give her love, which to her will mean her young life, to some one who will not value it except as a play-thing, or perhaps even for what she may possess, if your clipping comes to anything."

Mr. Anderson's face went crimson. "Miss Roth-

say, your object in talking to me is no doubt to warn me to take no liberties with Miss Gwen's heart. I am a personal friend of Justice Harwood's, and your last remark is rather a cut, to say the least," he said with some asperity.

Isabel was contrite in a moment. "I didn't mean you to take me up like that, Mr. Anderson. Oh, if you only knew how anxious I am that the dear little thing will be tenderly loved, and she has taken such a fancy to you already, that—that——"

"Forgive me, Miss Rothsay. I, too, jumped to conclusions, and I hope we will be friends all the same," he said, giving his big hand to her. Isabel gave hers frankly, feeling quite sure that Gwen's new friend was an honourable man.

"And you are quite right to warn a fellow, for—look here, Miss Rothsay, I will let you in for a secret. I'm head over ears in love with the sweet girlie already. Don't look alarmed. She had no idea. I hunted her off to that sick man of yours on purpose. If I am ever fortunate enough to win your sister for my own, I would count her the greatest treasure under heaven. Miss Rothsay, if you think it best for your sister's sake, I will go off at once and not let her see me again for whatever time you suggest, or at least until she meets other men. My lips have never kissed any woman's in my life. My own mother died when I was an infant, so you see your Gwen would be getting me holus-bolus, and every speck of my heart hers," he said with a smile.

"But, Mr. Anderson, you cannot know your heart already. Might you not be taken with her bright face?" she asked him.

"So sure, Miss Rothsay, that she could come back in fifty years if I'm alive, and she would find me still waiting for her," he answered, his big face aglow with honesty and truth.

Isabel was touched, and convinced of his manliness. "I do not think there is need for you to go away just now," she said with a smile; "just be very careful not to let her know, and I want you to come and pay us a visit at the farm within a few months. Can you? And I think you might go to the cottage and bring Gwen home at five o'clock."

"You're a brick. I'll promise to behave; but, I say, I hardly know how to thank you enough for inviting me to the farm. I shall always think of you as my fairy godmother now."

Isabel went away to tell her mother what she had done, but there was very little trouble on that score, for Mrs. Rothsay had taken a great fancy to Skrimpo also.

When the Rothsays and their friends took their leave from Cunninghame next morning, Isabel was not of the party. She elected to stay behind with Fergus, and her mother consented. Hugh had a long conference with his father the evening before, and they both decided that it would be best for him to go straight on to Melbourne, for the change would do him no further good. It was a great

disappointment to Justice Harwood that his son had failed to gain Isabel's love, but he was sure that the tangle would straighten out in time.

Isabel waved her good-byes from the cottage next morning, as they passed some distance away in the drag, to catch the early morning boat. Lallah Rencliffe, Harold Anderson, and John Mortimer and his mother were with them, but no Hugh could she see. As a matter of fact, he had walked down, earlier, to avoid Lallah Rencliffe.

Hilda and her father stayed a week longer at the farm, during which time Bob got Justice Harwood's consent to marry Hilda and their engagement was made public. Isabel received the news from Hilda next day, when she was feeling extra miserable. Hilda wrote more affectionately than she could have imagined, and Isabel, not knowing, thought bitterly, "I wonder if Hilda will still cling to Robert if this money business turns out contrary to expectations."

Little did Bob and Hilda think, as they read her bright sisterly letter of congratulations with what a heavy heart she wrote it.

Lallah Rencliffe travelled in the same train as Hugh, through to Melbourne, but he took every care to keep to a smoking compartment and did not see her again until over a week afterwards, when she made it her business to meet him as he was leaving his office. She held out her hand as though he was the last person she ever expected to meet.

"Oh, fancy meeting you! I'm honoured, considering how very ^{elusive} you're getting since your visit to the—er—country."

"I was not aware of it, Miss Rencliffe," he said with a laugh.

"Not aware of it, and you're adding a prefix now for the first time in my life," she said sharply.

"I think you must excuse me now; I'm in a hurry. I have to make up for my holiday, you know," he answered, paying no attention to her last remark.

"It strikes me that you are an awful bore since you mixed with those country creatures. Why, you never treated me so shamefully as you did coming down; you did not come once to look after me."

"There was no need; you had John Mortimer and his mother," he said quietly.

"John Mortimer! He wasn't you, Hugh. It was you that I wanted," she said passionately.

Hugh bit his lip, and concluded that, unless he was to make a scene, he had better be done with her there and then. "Miss Rencliffe, I would have been less cheerful company for you than John Mortimer, for he has given his heart to a good woman and won hers in return. I have given mine to a good woman, but cannot win hers——"

"Oh, Hugh, do you mean—do you mean that you love me?" ~

He interposed hastily, "I mean that I love Miss

Isabel Rothsay with my heart and soul and will never love any other woman."

Lallah was uncontrollable with rage and mortification. "That thing! You love her? A farm girl who is angling after Doctor Mackintosh!"

"Miss Rencliffe, that is false," he said sternly.

"It is not false," she answered, stamping her foot. "What else do you think she is posing as a saintly nurse for night after night but to intrigue the doctor? Why did she stay behind the others. I tell you, she loves the doctor and means to have him. You have no right to love anybody but me. You belong to me; everybody thinks we are to make a match of it, our names are always coupled together, our——"

"Miss Rencliffe, if my name is coupled with yours, so I expect it will be with half a dozen young ladies, for I was a chum to a good many, but gave my heart to none, until I paid this visit. Now there is but one woman for me. I am sorry if people have misconstrued my motives, but I will speedily rectify that," and before she could get her breath to say more he raised his hat and was striding down the street.

He had felt certain for some time past that there would be a scene, and now he was glad it was over. In his heart he knew what she had said, about Isabel angling after the doctor, was false, all the same it kept recurring to his mind, and he was

relieved when Doctor Mackintosh surprised him by walking into the office a few days later.

Hugh was genuinely glad to see him. "Hullo, doc! What brings you down? I thought you were fixed at Cunninghame for a week yet," he said as he shook hands.

"I was, too, Harwood, but—er—well," he hesitated, "the truth is, between ourselves, that I fell in love with Isabel Rothsay, and as she cannot love me I could not torture myself any longer," he said with a forced smile.

Hugh's heart gave a great thump. "I'm sorry for you, old man, but you see I'm in the same box myself. I, too, love her and was refused."

"Our cases are not parallel, my boy. I love her and that's the end of it, but I have her friendship—one of the truest friendships on this earth," he added with his eyes glowing.

"Yes, yes. I know her worth, but why are our cases different?" he asked breathlessly.

Dr. Mackintosh looked in his eyes as he answered, "Because, Harwood, she loves you and you alone."

Hugh's face flushed. "But you forget she has refused me finally," he began.

"Yes, but I am certain that she loves you, man; what the mistake is time alone will tell."

Hugh leaned his head on his hands. "I wish I knew. I cannot get to the bottom of it. All I do know is, that she is the best woman I ever met."

“ Or I either. There is a hope for you, but for me none,” the doctor answered sadly.

Hugh felt for him deeply. “ Well, old man,” he said more cheerfully, “ it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. By the way, how is Fergus McLeod ? ”

“ Better than ever I expected to see him. He suffers no pain whatever and seems quite resigned to his fate. Isabel Rothsay’s singing has done more to soften his nature than I thought a human voice capable of. He cannot bear to lose sight of her for a second. It is possible for him to last years in his present condition.”

“ I wonder how his poor old wife will support him ? ” asked Hugh.

“ Oh, didn’t you know that we got up a benefit concert for them ? It came off the night before I left. Isabel sang and made the people go off their heads. I was master of ceremonies. I think every man, woman and child in Cunninghame was there, including tourists. It was a great success, I tell you ; we realized over a hundred pounds, so that will be a lift to them.”

“ Rather ! ” answered Hugh, although a jealousy surged up in his heart for a second as he thought of the doctor enjoying so much of her society.

CHAPTER XVII

CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE

ISABEL was home again. Fergus was out of pain and feeling comparatively comfortable, and Nurse Helen was much happier since the concert, for her financial affairs had straightened out, thanks to the doctor and Isabel, so Isabel left them with fewer qualms than she could have done a few weeks earlier. Fergus could scarcely bring himself to part with her. "Come back again soon, lassie; we'll miss ye sadly," he said when she was leaving, and she had promised to come if possible; and now she was home, at the home where her closest memories were woven; but everything seemed different. The sight of the sweet old home could not move the dull apathy that was clinging about her. They all noticed her dull dazed face, but were powerless to help her, knowing her passionate nature.

Mrs. Rothsay and Robert had quite dreaded consulting her concerning the sale of the farm (for the legacy was a certainty now and Robert had but to present himself in person to step in to a huge

fortune), but when they did broach the subject, on her first evening home, she quite agreed with them and was eager to begin drafting the advertisements there and then.

When the family were together a few evenings later, Isabel quietly faced her mother's chair. "I think, mother dear, that when you all leave for England, that I will stay behind for another year. There are a great many things I would like to do before leaving for good; for I have made up my mind to turn professional singer, now that I can afford the luxury of good teachers and so forth. I would like to study Italian and French in Melbourne before going to Marchesi, then I will get the more good of her teaching. If I am going to give my life to it, I may as well do it thoroughly," she said with a smile.

"But, darling child, how could we leave you behind, and alone!" asked her mother tremulously.

Isabel knelt down and put her arms around her mother. "I will not be alone, mother, when I will be studying so hard; and you know, dear, that if I did go I would not do nearly so well, for I'd have to visit Bob and his wife and then Lucy and John, and you would want me, and then that fearful Skrimpo and his terrible wife would always be interrupting, and where would I be when I sang my first song in Paris! The people would hoot me for a thick-tongued foreigner. No, dear, you must let me have my own way. My profession is

going to be my husband, you know, and you must let me stay with him," she answered, with an attempt at playfulness.

And so it was finally agreed that after the double wedding of Lucy and Robert, which was to take place just before sailing, all the family but Isabel were to leave for England. Skrimpo was to sail in eight month's time and marry little Gwen in England ; Lucy and John were to remain in England for a few years, before finally settling in Sydney ; and Robert and Hilda would make their home in the hereditary mansion, where Robert's father was born. They all felt for Isabel, but sensibly hid their feelings, and when at the last minute a telegram came from Nurse Helen, asking Isabel to come to her, Fergus was worse, they all saw the relief in her face and let her go, rightly guessing her anxiety to avoid meeting Hugh.

It was a hard parting, and little Gwen sobbed aloud ; but it was over at length, and Isabel was on her way to Fergus, whom she found unconscious, and the neighbours helping Nurse Helen to do what she could for him. Isabel telegraphed to Dr. Mackintosh for advice. He replied that he would come himself ; he was interested in the case, and sent directions for them meanwhile.

Fergus did not regain his senses until after the doctor had arrived and administered a powerful drug. Then the old man was weak and dazed. The doctor had not expected this fresh development

and concluded that while Isabel had been there that her presence had kept Fergus from fretting, but when she had gone he began to worry at the long solitude that lay before him while his wife would be earning their living. The worry had brought his state to a crisis.

His face lit up when he realized that Isabel was sitting beside him. "I thought ye had gane, lassie," he said weakly.

"I'm here, Fergus, and you must hurry and get strong again, for I am going to take you both away for a fine change," she answered.

"Aye, dearie, I'll be goin' for a fine trip, ye kin, shortly. Ma time's no verra lang noo, lassie, but I fear the good Lord will no receive me with verra much favour, for I've been a' again His good teachings," he answered wearily.

"Cheer up, Fergus man; you may have a good many months yet to ask pardon and make peace with your Maker," Dr. Mackintosh said kindly.

"No, doctor. I reckernize your heart's talkin', but ye dinna kin the wickedness I've done and I'll jist hae to tak' the birch from God Almighty Hissel' and pit up wi' the punishments He'll meet oot to me. I was Satin's own appreentis, ye kin, and a faithfu' servant I was. Ye see, I beleaved in a good time on the earth. I knew and didna' care a rap about the heaven I'd most leekly never see, so I jist gaed the gait and had a braw time fightin' and brawlin' in drunken sprees and noo the Lord steps

in and thinks it's about time to tak' a hand and I've jist got to tak' what He gives me wi'oot a whist," Fergus said slowly and wistfully.

"I always think of Him as being more merciful than the tenderest parent, Fergus, and if you ask His forgiveness He will surely forgive," Isabel said earnestly.

"Bide a wee, lassie; ye pit the cart before the horse. If ye had half a dozen sons and all bit one o' 'em tried to obey what ye telled them, and the ither ane jist went his gait and disobeyed a' ye said till him, when they all came at last to ask ye to forgive 'em, would ye give the same favours to the disobedient son as ye would till them as tried to do their best to obey ye?" asked Fergus eagerly.

"No, Fergus, not the same, of course; but if I knew in my heart that it was harder for him to obey than the others, that his nature was more liable to temptations than theirs, I'd maybe do to him as I would to them. We none of us know what the other resists, just becausé we do not happen to be tempted in the same way ourselves. Fergus, the very best people are very imperfect, and none of us can afford to throw stones," Isabel said gently.

"She is right, Fergus, and I can't believe that the great God of mercy will deal unmercifully with us," said the doctor reverently.

Fergus dozed off, and Dr. Mackintosh made all arrangements to leave by the morning boat. He could do Fergus no good by remaining, but he was

anxious about leaving the two women to face what was in store for them.

The old disappointment revived when he was in Isabel's company, and he was tempted more than once to try his luck again; but honour to Hugh Harwood forbade, and Isabel had a way of bringing out the best qualities that one possessed, as all good women do.

Nurse Helen, Isabel and the doctor were all sitting in the room, silently watching Fergus in his fitful slumber. His rugged features had softened wonderfully since his illness. Nurse Helen let her tears fall as she watched him. "My poor Fergus," she said brokenly, "when ye had your great strength and health ye had no mind to use them aright, and now that ye are in your right mind the Lord has deprived ye o' that strength."

Fergus opened his eyes and looked at her, although she had spoken so quietly.

"Dinna worry, Helen lassie. Ye see, the Lord didna want me to hae too much perfection at ance. I've given ye a bad time, Helen, and for that I'm punished heavily."

Nurse Helen laid her little grey head on his broad chest and sobbed. "Dinna ye mind me, laddie, but make your peace wi' the Lord and then ye will be safe and watchin' for me when my time comes."

"Ah, Helen dearie, it's not mysel' that has any longin's for heaven. I'd sooner bide here wi' ye for

ever than gang to the best heaven above. I'm no verra keen on pearly gates and gold-paved streets, ye kin ; it 'd be a sore temptation to me to help mysel' to some and send it down to ye, lassie. D'ye kin anything aboot jist what it's like, doctor ? " Fergus asked, with a touch of his old wicked tone.

" No, Fergus man, I'm in the dark, as we all are. That there's a heaven no one can doubt, but it will be something beyond our conception. I should think the gold-paved streets and pearly gates is simply a description so that we might understand," the doctor said simply.

" It's verra leekly. Ah, it's a dark mystery ; but if the worst comes to the worst I've had a pretty good innings down here. Ah, lad, when I knocked John Missen out after he'd stolen the beer us -- fellows had hidden, I felt as near to being fit for heaven as ever I deed. Yes, I've had a braw time takin' one thing and anither into consideration. A' well, we canna hae a' the glory. Helen, ye are to kiss me good night and gang awa and lay ye doon. I'll be wantin' ye agin the morn, and I like to see my bit lassie braw ; ye are no a silly girlie, and ye hae the sense to know I'm better awa' to rest and wait. Maybe I can fix it up wi' the Lord and mak' things easier for ye, dearie ; anyway, ye are to use yer sense, and when the time comes I'll be waitin' if I hae to break through." He was trying his best to put a brave front before his wife.

Helen knew, but she kissed him and obeyed. She was quite brave and steady now, quite prepared for what her own eyes and sense told her was coming shortly.

Isabel followed and saw her comfortable and then came back to Fergus.

"Is she snug, lassie?" he asked.

"Yes, Fergus, snug and calm and was almost asleep when I left her. She has lost so much rest that she is worn out," Isabel answered.

"Ah! she is a brave bit woman. I want ye both to let her sleep and no disturb her. I'll no be troublin' ye much longer, punishment or no. I canna say I regret aught but how I treated poor Helen, the aine I loved best of a'; but the Lord will fix it up maybe, and when John Missen comes I'll tak' a lickin' fra him or any ither lubber as payment. I'm gettin' terribly sleepy; gie us a sip o' that broth, doctor. Isabel, lassie, I will pit in a spoke for ye up beyond; ye hae been my bright star. Sing a wee bit song, lassie," he drawled off and closed his heavy lids.

Isabel sang softly and tremulously scraps of the old Scotch songs that he loved the best, and soon he was sleeping like a little babe.

"Miss Rothsay, if you would go and make us a cup of coffee, I would be obliged to you," Dr. Mackintosh said quietly.

After she had left the room, he turned back the clothes and put his ear to Fergus's heart. He

covered him reverently and stood with bowed head for a few minutes, then sought Isabel.

"Fergus has gone to his long home, my friend; he has passed quietly away in his sleep," he said gently.

"Ah, I was expecting it. Poor Nurse Helen!" she said, her sweet face full of womanly sympathy.

"Miss Isabel, she is not poor. She had the great strong love of one man and he has died blessing her. His love has been selfish, still that was his way. Blessed man! We are all not so fortunate," he said sadly, and Isabel's tender heart was touched.

"Dear doctor, you will have many true friends who love you, and some good woman will love you if you will give her the chance," she said brokenly.

"No, Miss Isabel, I cannot set aside my love so easily. I have my life's work ahead and I will make myself content; but, dear friend, I am anxious that your life's happiness will come soon. Do not let some simple thing blast your life and that of a fine honourable man; remember, dear, that you have his love and life in your keeping," he said in his tender, earnest voice, and before she could reply he had gone out.

She left a tray with the coffee and scones, and putting a wrap about her head went out. The night was bright and clear, and Isabel walked on to the hill, where she could look down on the great moonlit ocean, which had been calling her all day. Each great boom of the breakers had seemed a call to

her. She stretched out her arms to the great heaving waters as though they could understand her heart. The action soothed her. "Great, beautiful mystery," she thought, "perhaps poor simple Fergus knows more now than all of us. Fergus lay there lifeless ; somewhere close at hand, a little babe was born into the world. Life and death with its fathomless mysteries, physics and metaphysics and endless eternity. There is nothing tangible but life itself—beautiful life whose controlling force is mind. Nurse Helen will always be happy now knowing that Fergus loved her and died thinking of her. It seems weak and childish to admit it, but I believe that men and women of us want our heart's mate—it must be so—it is Nature calling. Our mental state makes or mars our world. Yes, it must be so ; for if Hugh, my Hugh, were to come and tell me that what I had heard had been a bad dream, and that he loved me more than life, I should be wild with joy and should almost forget Nurse Helen's sad trouble ; but it can't be, and here I am sad and miserable, when I should be trying to comfort others."

Isabel sank on her knees and offered a short prayer for strength and sense, while the roar of the great breakers seemed to fill the night with sound. She rose and walked down the hill towards the cottage. In the ti-tree she met the doctor coming to search for her. He took her arm and led her into the house, his kindly heart knowing how she

must be feeling. "Now, Miss Rothsay, you are going to drink a cup of coffee, and then you are going to go and sleep till morning. I will call you before Nurse Helen wakes. I will not leave until the day after to-morrow."

Isabel obeyed and then gave him her hand before going. "Good doctor, my true good friend," she said quietly.

Nurse Helen did not waken until some time after Isabel was up, and then the little woman came out of her room fresh and sweet, with all traces of grief banished from her countenance.

Isabel came and put her arms around her. "Yes, I know, my bairn. I dreamed that Fergus had gone home, and, bairnie dear, I am glad that his sufferings are over—my poor man. Ah! but you see he loved me all through, even when I used to think he didna care, he loved me all the time. I can bear it now, lassie. Oh! it is a priceless thing to hae a man's love. Now I can bide me here in peace and I'll always have the thought he loved me all through and I'm to go to him."

She left then and went into Fergus's room. When she came out she was pale but bravely placid, and helped Isabel get the breakfast. Then it was she who urged the doctor to go and take some rest.

Nurse Helen wisely made arrangements for Fergus to be buried late that afternoon, and when the doctor awakened, he found quite a gathering of friends at the cottage.

When the last sad rites were over and Fergus McLeod was laid in his last earthly resting place, the doctor and Isabel led Nurse Helen back to the cottage. The brave little woman broke down for a few minutes, but soon recovered herself, and for the rest of the evening was by far the brightest of the trio.

"Love's mysterious ways," said the doctor to Isabel, when they were alone. "She is happy now, believing her man to be safe and cared for."

The doctor left by the morning's boat, and Nurse Helen and Isabel were left to face their new future. Isabel decided to stay with her for a month before beginning her studies and wrote to her mother to that effect. No one of them suggested that she should be present at the marriage, although they all wished it.

Isabel was restless and excited and would take long trudges along the beach daily, but she could not sing and she was too restless to study. She was glad when the wedding day came and passed. She sent letters and telegrams, and all day she stayed by the side of the great ocean, blaming herself for her selfishness. When at last she got back to the cottage, worn out and white, she found a long telegram from Justice Harwood, telling her that they had sailed, all well and happy. A few days later she had a descriptive letter from little Gwen, written between the wedding and time of sailing.

"Lucy and Hilda looked simply lovely, Izy. Just in their travelling dress you know, but they were so fearfully happy looking. Just think, Izy, Hugh did not get back from Brisbane in time for the wedding. He telegraphed and sent lovely presents. I think they were both too happy to worry, though. Oh, I say, Izy, my Skrimpo was the biggest and grandest and handsomest man there. I didn't say anything, but oh, I did wish that he would just come and pick me up and take me up to the altar and marry me too. Just think, Izy! eight great, long months before I see the darling again. I wish, dear, that you would make up your mind to come soon. I hate to leave you. Dear mother looked so proud of Lucy and Bob. Now, Izy dear, Skrimpo is waiting to take this letter to the post and then he is coming to take me on board, and I only hope that the old boat goes off and leaves him on. Izy, I think I'm the happiest girl alive. Your own Gwen."

Isabel let her tears drop on the letter. "Dear bright Gwen, she has come into her heritage early," she thought. She kissed the letter and put it away. "Now, Isabel Rothsay," she said to herself in the mirror, "let those be the last tears you shed. In future you've got to face this world bravely. Yes, this glorious world. No more repinings. I'll give you a week longer here, and then off you go and work."

Next morning, true to her resolution, she was out with the birds and away along the beach, and when out of earshot of all save the sea-birds, she began a systematic practice of scales and exercises, her clear, rich voice rising above the noise of the breakers. She came back to the cottage looking more her old self than she had been since she had lost her cross. That day she helped Nurse Helen mend the fishermen's jerseys. After that she spent two hours in the early morning, practising by the sea, and studied when she was not busy helping Nurse Helen.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FINDING OF THE IVORY CROSS

IMMEDIATELY after the Christmas holidays, Isabel left the cottage and travelled to Melbourne. She wanted Nurse Helen to come and live with her, but the little woman knew that she could never be happy apart from her usual work, or away from her husband's grave.

"Now, my darling bairn, dinna think that I'm wishin' to interfere wi ye, but, dearie, don't ye throw away the love o' a good man for fame," she said as she bade farewell to Isabel.

"Fame!" she thought, as she was being driven to the boat, "why, I'd rather Hugh's love than all the gold in the world."

She went straight to an address in Carlton, which Dr. Mackintosh had given her, saying that the people were friends of his in reduced circumstances, so she was expected and welcomed. She had told the doctor that she did not wish her friends to know that she was in town, lest it would interfere with her studies, so trusting him so implicitly, she felt safe.

She began to study at once and found that the

hard work was a splendid tonic. The Professor, who had taken her for singing, was in raptures and wanted to make her voice public at once, but she firmly refused.

She worked through the autumn and winter steadily, scarcely giving herself any rest. Regular letters from her people were her one great source of joy. Gwen's letters were always full of Skrimpo. Robert and Lucy were too full of happiness to write coherently, and it was to Gwen that she looked for any interesting descriptions of their new home.

Gwen described at length the architectural beauty of Bob's new home, but ended that it would never do for Skrimpo and her. "I only want a pretty cottage, Izy (with everything comfy and big), so that I won't be away upstairs and Skrimpo a mile away in another wing. I want to be always near to box his ears. Oh, Izy! I'm so happy. In the morning I run about all over the grounds and park, or go for a ride, and you see at luncheon time half the day is gone, and I make the rest of the day fly, and then there's a whole day gone, and one day less till he comes, and when the days won't hurry through quickly enough, I sit and write pages and pages to him and then it is night before I know it."

But Isabel knew and understood. Little Gwen's letters were the true woman speaking.

Spring came in hot and Isabel began to long for the hills, until she could not sleep for the tugging at her heart. Occasionally she met a few of her

old country neighbours, but she did not meet or seek her city friends. Dr. Mackintosh had sold his practice and come to bid her good-bye before leaving for Auckland, where he meant to settle. She looked so slight and white that he was alarmed, and made her promise to go to Cunninghame and rest at Nurse Helen's for a few weeks, at least.

Skrimpo, too, came to wish her good-bye, his great, honest, manly face beaming with joy and hope. "Tell them all I will not be long now; I must see them soon, or I will—will——" She faltered.

"Look here, Isabel! I'll help you shove your things together in no time, and you come along with me, do!" he said heartily.

"Not just yet, thank you all the same, but I'll come presently. I must go to the country once before I go. When I see you again you will be 'my really truly brother,' as dear little Gwen says," she said more brightly.

"Isabel, I don't know if you can understand me, but I tell you that I'm the happiest fellow on the earth. I'd feel strong and rich if I didn't own anything else but that darling girlie's heart. Oh! Isabel, it's a great thing, this love—it's beside every earthly blessing," he said, his eyes shining with earnestness.

After he left, Isabel sat down and wrote to Nurse Helen, and immediately after posting it began to pack her bag, so that both the letter and she arrived

by the same boat, to the old lady's joy and surprise.

"My bairnie! but you look pale and thin. Never mind, lassie, your bad time is over. I can't tell why, but I foresee the shadows drifting and the light ahead for you."

Isabel kissed her on the cheek. "Dear little woman! it lifts some of the shadows to be with you again."

Isabel regained health and cheerfulness rapidly. She often went for a long sail on the lake with a young lodger, a fisher lad whom Nurse Helen had taken in at first to supplement her income and soon got to love and depend on so much that she looked upon him almost as a son now. Isabel was glad, for she could leave her with less regret.

Hugh was living an uneventful life since Hilda's marriage. He missed her greatly and corresponded regularly with them all, but he never questioned Isabel's whereabouts and they did not mention her to him, fearing to open his wounds afresh.

His father and he were more like brothers than father and son, and had almost lived in one another's society lately. Hugh had buried himself in hard work and now had a large practice in Collin's Street.

As springtime came around, Isabel was more often in his thoughts than ever. The smell of the wild flowers was in his nostrils, and he could hear the hum of the bees and the song of the birds. The hills were calling him, and often in the middle of perusing a legal document he would wander away

and get lost in the hills, and then he could not concentrate his mind on the work again. After one particularly busy and trying day, when the court cases had been more fatiguing and stupid than usual, he had gone back to the office to find a grumbling client. Hugh was tired and overwrought. Turning to the man, he told him to take himself and his work out of the office without delay, and then, after a few hasty instructions to his clerk, he went home. The hills were calling, calling, and he must go.

Was it the call of the hills, or was it that vague something which urges us to spontaneous action? He did not understand and did not wait to analyse; he only knew that the city had become insufferably stuffy, the people drab and uninteresting, and he himself stifling for the freedom of air and hills. Deep in his heart there was the longing to get in the same vicinity as Isabel, to go over all old scenes and try and fathom the mystery of her attitude.

"Go, my lad—certainly. It's the very thing that will set you up again," Justice Harwood had answered, when Hugh had acquainted him with his sudden decision to take a holiday, and so he had departed with his father's handclasp and final wistful glance still warming his heart.

It was spring again—just a year since they had visited the farm. The country looked much the same. The wild shrubs and creepers were blossoming, and the air was redolent of the wattle blossom

and heath. Spring was everywhere—in the fields, in the bush, in the people's faces ; even Hugh felt it surging in his heart, as the train whizzed past the fern-clad hills. They were part and parcel of Isabel, these wild bush-covered hills ; she knew and loved them, and that was enough for Hugh's loyal heart ; besides, they were full of character, these hills, full of the music of Nature. Isabel had told him so, and when he looked at them and thought of her, he felt sure she was right.

He got off at the same little railway station and put up for the night at the *Bushman's Arms Hotel*, a diminutive structure of some importance in the eyes of the proprietor, who hustled towards his prospective guest, with the air of a man who had not a second at his disposal.

Hugh asked to be accommodated for the night, in his most deferential manner.

"Er—let me see ! oh yes, I fancy you can have number six. I will just see if it is vacant," he said with a puckered face, and then hastened off to ascertain.

Hugh smiled to himself, rightly concluding that he was the only guest the little man would be likely to have that night, for with the exception of a bullock wagon, on which a huge log was slowly being drawn towards the local saw-mill, and a big wagonette, with a solitary horse in the shafts, which was dozing before a small building, whose large sign proclaimed it to be "The leading provision mer-

chants—grain, groceries, ironmongery, and drapery stores,” and a flock of straying geese crossing the street—not another being hove in sight.

Presently his host returned and led him to number six. It was presumably the sixth and last room which that colossal hostelry contained. Hugh commanded his gravity long enough to bargain for a horse to take him to Walhalla in the morning. After his host had left him he sank on the narrow stretcher and boyishly kicked his heels in the air and surveyed number six. It was a skillion room, 8 by 8, whose diminutive ceiling was roughly papered and which the slightest breeze sent into a gently waving sea, but when he raised the window, bumping his head in the act, and the door chanced to be left open at the same time, the sea became a boiling fury and threatened destruction to something, so Hugh closed the door and sat by the window, listening to the lap-lap of the ceiling waves. In a short while a small figure with a tear-stained face came sobbing around the house and passed under the window of number six. Hugh, who loved children, called after him, “ Say little man ! what’s the matter ? ” The little fellow curved his elbow over his face and peered at Hugh shyly.

“ Nuffin,” came in a wee small voice.

“ Oh, go on now ! what have you been crying for, old man ? ” he asked kindly.

“ Mother beat Patsy Fitznoodle and he’s mine,” he said, and fresh tears began to drop.

“ Who is Patsy Fitznoodle ? ”

“ He’s me own doggie, and he wanted the old chops as well as you did,” the little fellow said sullenly.

“ What chops, old fellow ? ” asked Hugh, and then light began to dawn on him. “ I say, did Patsy get hold of the chops cook had for my dinner, is that it ? ”

“ Yes, it is, and there ain’t no cook, only mother, and there ain’t no more cause the butcher don’t come round till to-morrow, and me mother’s only got corn beef, and it ain’t cooked,” he ended dolefully.

“ Never mind, old chap,” Hugh said kindly, going out to see for himself. He met the landlady in the passage—a pretty little, fair woman, with a baby in her arms. “ If you come in the dining-room, sir, I’ll soon have you something to eat ; one can’t do much with a baby in one’s arms,” she added apologetically.

Hugh looked at her and took it all in. “ Poor little soul is flustered ; perhaps doesn’t see a stranger in a twelvemonth,” he thought. Aloud he said, “ Look here, you mustn’t make any bother for me. I’d be glad of a cup of tea if the kettle’s boiling, but I’d just as soon have a bit of bread and cheese and a glass of ale.”

“ You’re very accommodatin’, I’m sure, and it’ll save me a lot of bother. My man’s gone over to Walbecks farm to try and get some meat for the

tea, and he shouldn't oughter be long now," she said nervously.

"I wonder if the baby would come to me? I'm fond of little babies," he said, putting out his arms to the child. She smiled at him and hid her face in her mother's neck, then peeped out again. "Come on, you rogue," he said, holding out his arms for the little thing; she stretched her little body towards him and snuggled into his arms when he took her.

"Well! I never seen the likes, and her so shy too; she can't stand the sight of a stranger as a rule. Thanks very much, sir; one can't do much when the baby won't go down; she's infractus with her teething, you know," she added as she went out, bumping against the door in her nervousness.

Patsy Fitznoodle's master peeped in the door and looked a bit anxious on the baby's account, and presently his two-year-old brother crept up to his side, and catching sight of the stranger with their baby sister, looked daggers drawn at Hugh. "Put bubba down, man! I'll chop wour wead woff," he called out. Hugh smiled and the little ones crept a bit nearer; he tried to coax them into the room, but when their mother came with a tray and the luncheon, they both ran behind her and hid in the folds of her dress, nearly upsetting tray, hot water and all. Then when Hugh took his watch and held it before the baby's eyes, they

forgot their shyness, in their inquisitiveness to see all about it, and crept to his knees.

"Why, sir, you look a real family man," she said when she came into the room again.

Hugh laughed. "I'm a single man so far, but I hope some day to have little children of my own. I think every man and woman has the same wish, don't you?"

"Well yes, sir, I do. If you men would only marry earlier, there wouldn't be so many old maids about, and it isn't that they want to be single, poor things! but there's nothing else for them when the men waste half their lives before they marry. Now, bubba, you come along and let the gentleman get a bite of something to eat and drink his tea while it's hot. I'll just be in the kitchen if you want anything else, sir. I'll put up that winder; it's a terrible peaky house, but my man likes to make out it's all right; he's a bit flash in his ways, being a town chap when he was young. After comin' from a big place like Warrigal, this do seem quiet, don't it?" and so she talked on, until Hugh, who understood human nature thoroughly, glued his eyes on a picture and became so absorbed that the little woman slipped out easily and took care not to come into the room again until Hugh had gone for a stroll with the boys, who had become quite friendly, after he had given them sixpence apiece to buy lollies. The elder had invited him to "come and see that old Woods

the storekeeper didn't cheat," so Hugh had assisted in the purchase and was afterwards led to a log, while they shared them out "for mother and father and bubba and Jimmie and me and you."

"Have you got any little boys like us?" Billy, the elder one, asked.

"No, Billy, not one," Hugh answered.

"Why don't you get some?" he asked, with his mouth full of lollies.

"Well, Billy—well—er—because, you see, I've got no mamma for them."

"Why don't you buy a mommer like ours? Don't you like any?"

"Look here, Billy, I'll tell you a secret. I love a lady very, very much, but she won't——" Hugh hesitated for a word.

"Don't she love you too? You just give her sixpence to buy lollies, and I'll bet she'll love you then."

"Thanks, old chap, I'll bear in mind what you say," said Hugh soberly, and after awhile he went back to the house with his mind still on Isabel. His hostess was peeling potatoes in the wee porch of the kitchen door, and the baby was sitting, propped up, in a large clothes basket on the floor.

"Do you know who lives at Rothsay's old place at Ferny Creek now?" he asked her.

She put down her knife. "Why, I did hear, but it's clean left my memory now. Did you know the Rothsays, sir?"

"Oh yes, I knew them well."

"Well, just imagine that! Well, you know a good family; they're missed, if ever people was. Them girls was ladies born, and so was the old lady, and so was Robert Rothsay a gentleman; they was never flash like some of the people about here. Wasn't it wonderful the luck they all had, and them with so little nonsense? I've often wondered why Isabel never went with the rest; some say she's been preparin' herself for the stage, she do sing lovely, and I'm certain stage or no stage will never conceit her. She's been away in Melbourne this six months studyin' these foreign languages that she's got to sing in, so they say."

"In Melbourne? Are you sure?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes, my man met her there about five weeks ago; he said she looked ill and worried, but she had a pleasant smile for him."

"Thank you very much. I must look her up when I go back," said Hugh, going off and leaving the little woman wondering why she was thanked.

He was all impatient now to get the trip through and get back to town. He retired early, after the good tea which his hostess had contrived to make for him, and stayed awake so late thinking of Isabel, that his host had some difficulty waking him as early as he had asked to be awakened.

After a hot breakfast he set off, every pulse tingling with excitement at the prospect of visiting

the familiar scenes again. He made a detour and rode past the old homestead. In the early morning, with the soft lights and shades, it looked all that he had always pictured it—a pleasant home, surrounded by Nature, a place that had held so much happiness and so many loyal hearts.

The same old pain smote him as he rode on through the pale light and listened to the birds singing their gladsome songs, the same dread and loneliness that the thoughts of a city life always affected him with. Somewhere at the back of his mind a thought crept in, that should Isabel still remain obdurate he would abandon city life and take up land back in the hills somewhere, where he could live his own life undisturbed. It didn't matter much about his future, if she was not to share it. The comical laugh of a jackass, perched on a burnt stump, brought Hugh out of his reverie, and he sent back an answering laugh, which resounded through the gullies and brought the lyre birds into evidence, for they are clever mimics and delight in untoward sounds. After his laugh, Hugh gave himself up to the enjoyment of his surroundings.

The hillsides were one glory of pink and white heath, which the bees were feasting on, the flowering creepers hung from the trees and crept over broken logs, and here and there, when Hugh drew rein to listen, he could hear the murmur of the mountain brook below him.

By three o'clock he rode into the yard of the same

hotel which they had stayed at before. But Hugh was not remembered, and he did not recall himself to their memories. He was stiff and tired after the unaccustomed exercise and was glad to lie and rest for the remainder of the day, but early next morning he was astir, refreshed and bright after the day's rest.

By 9 o'clock he was on his way to the river. He meant to traverse the self-same path, and if possible go over all the ground where their party had been before, and above all else he meant to find Isabel's cross. With swinging step he walked along the tram line. Everything looked quite familiar to him, although he had only been there once before, but the scenes had lived in his memory for a year. The very birds seemed to be singing the same songs ; the Italians who passed him were the same men ; he even slipped down the same narrow track again to the banks of the creek, caught on a long rope of flowering clematis, just as he had done a year before. Bit by bit he got along through the singing birds, until he got to little Gwen's see-saw. There it lay over the log, one end tilted up in the air and the other in amongst the bracken and grass. Nobody appeared to have visited that part of the creek since their visit, probably on account of the roughness of the ground. Hugh stood a long time looking about him, and was turning to gain the hill when he remembered the chase that they had had, and it came to him that

Isabel had not followed. Where had she got to? Hugh turned back and began to pick his way through the bracken and scrub, wondering if he would come on to a track, then like a flash he remembered that Isabel had said she lost her cross in the ditch when she fell. He determined to find that ditch, if possible, and was making his way cautiously through the high bracken and broken timber when a rustle amongst the dry ferns made him step back hastily, fearing snakes, as the day was hot. Next minute he went sprawling into the ditch and lay on his back amongst the ferns and scrub.

Hugh could not forbear a laugh, but he picked himself up and gripped the little shelf of earth in the side of the ditch, and there almost under his hand lay Isabel's ivory cross, safe and sound. He raised it to his lips and kissed it. Here was an excuse to see her anyway; she would be delighted to have her cross again, and perhaps—perhaps—who knew? he would risk it anyway. A few yards back from the ditch or gorge he found a small track running towards the hill, which he followed until he got near the road, and then he saw that it stopped short, ending in a cave, and no doubt the little track was made by the wild things taking shelter in the same little cave. Out of idle curiosity he looked in. The first thing that struck his vision was a torn stocking; he smiled, wondering how it got there, and was about to try and climb up on the road, when casting a last glance into the cave

he saw a small white handkerchief which had blown into the corner ; he crawled in and dragged it out into the light. " H'm, a dainty little thing," he said aloud, and opened it out carelessly. The next minute he stood transfixed to the spot, for it was Isabel's handkerchief and her name was finely embroidered in one corner. Isabel's handkerchief and cross ! Then what had happened that day ? Hugh closed his eyes and brought his legal mind to bear on the evidence now in his hand. Isabel had apparently taken a short cut and landed in the gorge as he had done ; then she had probably taken the same little track as he had taken, which led to the cave. That was clear enough ; she had sat there to rest and try and fix up her torn stocking. Her stocking ! As he realized the fact he opened his eyes and made a grab at it and gently pressed it to his lips, then he put both away in his breast pocket and resumed his judicial reasoning. " What did she do then ? Where the dickens were we all ? Hilda and I came back to look for her, I remember, and we began teasing each other most unmercifully. . . . Great Heaven ! Where were we ? " Hugh crushed through the scrub and dragged himself up a rocky ledge, and stood immediately over the cave and glanced about him. He was on the road which led to the river cut out of the side of the mountain like the tramway road, but broad enough to allow a wagon team to travel on. Yes, he remembered perfectly ; while they

talked Hilda had been toying with a beautiful young mountain ash which grew above on the cutting, and he himself had been throwing a stone at a bit of projecting rock farther along; he recognized the place perfectly.

While they had teased Isabel had lain there bruised and sore and heard every word they said. Hilda had teased him about marrying Lallah Rencliffe, and he had let her think for awhile that she was right, and Isabel had believed. The mystery was solved at last

When at last he realized that he was sure, his joy knew no bounds. He would go straight to her and explain, and before he knew it he was off like the wind, swinging his arms and singing again on that mountain side Burn's immortal song, "The Red, Red Rose":

"Oh, my luv's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
Oh, my luv's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

"As fair thou art, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luv am I;
And I will luv thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry."

Hugh looked the quintessence of happiness and manliness as he swung around a bend, where the tramroad had become narrow, singing "Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi' the sun——" He had swung around so sharply

and rapidly that he almost knocked down a lady coming towards him. "I really beg your pardon, madam, I——" But he got no farther, for there before him was Isabel Rothsay, with flushed face and her soul in her eyes.

"Isabel, can it really be you, dear?" he said in one gasp.

She flushed deeper and tried to withdraw her hand, which Hugh had grasped, but he only took the other and looked into her face. "Isabel, my darling, you can never get away from me again—never."

"Mr. Harwood, you forget——" began Isabel.

"No, dear, I only remember. I will tell you, and then you will understand. I have stifled and thirsted for these hills for months, love, because they seemed to belong to you—the longing became unbearable, and I just had to come. I went to the place where we had our lunch that day, and in trying to find the place where you lost your cross I fell into the gorge and found your cross, dear, and then I discovered your cave, where you had crept after your accident. I found your handkerchief and a piece of your torn stocking, then it struck me that Hilda and I had walked back looking for you, and had stopped just above your cave, teasing each other spitefully about Lallah Rencliffe and Dr. Jack, each afraid to open their heart to the other just at first and hiding our real feelings under stupid banter. Then we came back and

Hilda confided her secret to me. Bob and she did not want to tell their secret for awhile longer."

Isabel's face was pale, and her eyes shining with excitement. "Had Hilda accepted Bob then?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, dear; Bob proposed a few nights before, and Hilda was out of her wits with joy."

"Then I have misjudged her. I—I thought it was the legacy that made her decide to take him. I am so glad that it was for his own sake," she said quietly.

"Ah, you could easily have thought so after our talking as we did, but you see we both confided our secrets that day, and I told Hilda how I loved you, my darling, and she was glad; and in the midst of our joy you could not be found, and when you were, you were so changed that I could not understand you. Thank Mercy, all is right now. I've got you for ever, Isabel—for ever and ever. I will never let you go again."

"Stop, Hugh! I have given you no right. What about Lallah Rencliffe? You know what you said that day."

"My darling, can't you understand that it was only spiteful banter? She has never been anything to me—just a friend who visited often at our home, so people coupled our names, as they have with many another girl. You saw how she behaved at the lakes. After that I met her in Melbourne, and she openly upbraided me for my neglect, and

I told her straight out that you and only you should share my name, and that is the last time I have ever spoken to her. Isabel, can't you trust me? Be my wife, dear, and then I'll have the right to protect you against everything."

Isabel gave one look into his earnest face and blushed a rosy red. "Hugh, forgive me for my stupidity; I have always loved you."

He caught her in his arms. "Darling, darling, for ever and ever! Isabel, I've thought and thought until my very heart turned sick, and still the mystery seemed no nearer, and then it seemed just as though Providence sent me here to find you at last."

"Dear Hugh! I am sorry I caused you all this pain and worry. My heart has been as hungry as yours, love, and your image has come between my work and me. I was just going to try and find my cross, and then I was going to England to give my life to my work; but I would have been a failure, for my heart was always with you. Something kept whispering, 'Go to Walhalla, go to Walhalla, and your troubles will be ended.'" Isabel nestled her head on Hugh's shoulder. She had reached her haven of rest at last—the haven of true love which every woman born tries to reach at some time or other. And why not? For love is the beginning and end and the greatest force on earth. Those who miss it miss the greatest of God's good gifts.

A new world had opened for Isabel and Hugh, which they would henceforth tread together, for no earthly power ever separates hearts where true love has once entered.

“ Isabel, we must go to one of the ministers here and get married at once. I will never risk letting you out of my sight again.”

“ I suppose you are right, dear. I do not want a fuss, and I can buy what I want in town ; but, oh dear, I had forgotten them all. Hugh, they are expecting me to sail in a week ; what shall I do ? ” she asked in sudden alarm.

“ Just sail, my darling, and bring your husband along ; and I say, Izy, the dad has been talking of going home to see them all—couldn’t we bring him along ? ”

Isabel pressed his hand and looked her delight, for she loved the Justice already.

“ Isabel, after we are married I’ll wire the dear old dad, and say I’m bringing my wife back ; won’t he look ! ”

And so they wandered back and went straight to the Parsonage, and the minister good-naturedly married them straight away. Afterwards they stayed and took tea with them, for Isabel and they were well acquainted. Both the reverend gentleman and his good wife took care to let Hugh know that they considered him the luckiest mortal alive.

Hugh sent his horse back by messenger, and he and his wife took coach for Moe railway station

next morning. Justice Harwood was on the Princess Bridge platform, with an anxious look of expectancy on his grand old face. Hugh held Isabel back and watched his father. At last he caught sight of them, and after a moment's look of surprise, he caught Isabel in his arms and kissed her. "My daughter, my daughter, at last," he said affectionately, while the tears gathered in his eyes.

Isabel and Hugh were just as deeply affected. It seemed a crowning happiness to them.

"Bless me, but if you only knew how relieved I am! I was afraid that my boy had been caught on the rebound by that woman Rencliffe, and I rather dreaded the meeting; but as it's you, Isabel, why, that's been my highest hope. Come home, children, come home," he said, giving them both an arm and marching them off to the waiting carriage.

That night after supper Isabel sat holding his hand, as she told him of their wish that he should travel home with them.

"If you will not think I'm in the way, I'll come gladly, dear," he said joyfully.

"No, indeed, I will only be too glad of your help to keep Hugh in order; he is so wild," Isabel said with a joyous laugh.

"Don't notice her, dad. She has such kittenish ways that I'll be glad for you to watch her when I'm not there."

"Hugh, you keep quiet if you can. I am going to sing for your father."

Justice Harwood caught her hand. "Yours, too, my child; remember you're my child as much as Hugh now." Isabel blushed, and leaning down kissed the old man on the cheek. "I will be proud to call you father, for my own dear father loved you, too"; and then she went to the piano and sang some of Justice Harwood's songs, her rich, clear voice floating out to the street, where she had quite a small audience.

Hugh led her out into the garden. "I'd like to make this our home while the dad lives, Isabel—after you have seen them all again, and then in the years to come we can live where we will."

Isabel had her head on his shoulder. "Where you will, Hugh love; a city mansion or the desert is all the same to me as long as you are there. You are my home now and for ever."

"Oh, my wife, what a great thing has come to us—the greatest of all God's gifts!" Hugh answered, with his arm about her waist, and together they passed into the house, and the bright moonlight without was pale compared with the brightness of their love and hope.

FINIS.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

PR	Clarke -
4453	Ivory cross
C71i	

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 000 368 872 8

PR
4453
C71i

